

# The Potter and the Clay

*Jeremiah 18:1-6*

In a rugged village, high in the Hindu Kush Mountains of Afghanistan, lived a famous potter. The late Phillip Keller, author of the books, *A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23* and *A Shepherd Looks at the Good Shepherd and His Sheep*, told of his visit to this man's little shack. He told how he watched the potter going about his work. He examined the pieces of finished pottery on the hut's shelves. The pottery was exquisite, transparent, and shimmered in the light. The pieces were of the most varied shapes Phillip had ever seen. He said the pieces were equal to anything that could be seen in the most expensive China shop anywhere in the world. As Phillip watched the man working, the Lord brought to him some powerful lessons.

In Jeremiah 18, the Lord told the prophet to go down to the potter's house. Jeremiah obeyed, going down the winding, narrow streets in the lower city of Jerusalem, near the rich clay deposits in the Valley of Ben Hinnom. As Jeremiah entered the potter's house, he saw the potter working on his wheel. The King James Version records an interesting historical note in verse 3 where it reads, ". . . he wrought a work on the wheels." There is no need to wonder if the potter was working on two wheels at the same time when we understand the construction of a potter's wheel in the time of Jeremiah. The potter's wheel in Jeremiah's day consisted of two parallel clay or stone wheels connected by a shaft. As the potter turned the lower wheel with his bare feet, the upper wheel revolved smoothly, allowing the potter to shape the lump of clay into a vessel that suited him.

As Jeremiah watched, he saw the potter place a lump of clay on the center of the wheel. As it revolved, he pressed his thumbs deep into the clay to open up the vessel. Then he drew the vessel into a bowl-like shape by applying upward pressure with his hands. As Jeremiah watched, the vessel began to wobble and crack. Quickly the potter pressed the flawed vessel back into a lump of clay. Then just as quickly, he began to shape another vessel from the marred lump.

The Bible contains many illustrations of potters and clay. The potter refers to God and the clay to His people. As we seek to understand the potter's work, truths about our spiritual lives begin to emerge. In this lesson, we will look at six steps in the pottery-making process and draw lessons from each. There are lessons God can teach us today from even the ordinary, dirty clay. It is encouraging and exciting to realize that God can use the ordinary, simple things and people in His service. God is not particularly looking for clever or brilliant people, but for faithful people.

## **1. Gathering the clay**

Before the potter can start, he needs to gather clay. Phillip told how the old potter in Afghanistan took him out behind his little shed to a riverbank. He lifted a trapdoor to reveal his clay bank. It was dirty, dark and smelly. The old potter reached down with his long fingers and felt for the right clay with great care. He didn't take just any clay. He spent a great deal of time picking the exact clay that he wanted. He carefully lifted out the proper clay and placed it in his container. Phillip was amazed at the time it took and at the filth he had to sift through to find the clay.

This image reminds us of the horrible pit from which we were drawn. When the Master Potter came looking for us, He found us in the filth of our sins. We were lost, damned, and without hope. With great

love and infinite care, our Savior drew us up out of the filthy pit, set our feet on a rock, and established our going (Psalm 40:2). He had to exercise infinite love and patience with many of us as we resisted His Spirit's call to salvation. Aren't you glad His grace and mercy extended down into that pit and gave you salvation? Aren't you glad He didn't turn away from the dirty, sinful place where He found us? Aren't you glad His love constrained Him to provide for our salvation with infinite love and patience even while we were His enemies? Have you thanked Him lately for your salvation?

## **2. Cleaning the clay**

With infinite care, the potter kneads and molds the clay. He searches out and removes any little twig, stone or impurity. Sometimes this process is done with rods. The clay is placed on a table and beaten with the rod until it is smooth and all the impurities are removed.

This reminds us of our spiritual lives. After we are saved, God turns the great spotlight of His Holy Spirit on our lives and points out areas that need to be removed. The process can be painful but it is absolutely necessary. If the potter does not remove all the impurities and air pockets from the clay, it may explode when it is placed in the furnace. This will destroy the vessel and may damage or destroy other vessels that are in the kiln with it.

Just so, if we are to be vessels that are useful in God's service, we must stay on the table until all the impurities are removed. We must be open and receptive to the Holy Spirit as He instructs us about areas we need to remove. Jesus said, "He that hath my commandments, and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me . . . If a man love me, he will keep my words . . . He that loveth me not keepeth not my sayings" (John 14:21, 23-24).

Our natural inclination is to rush the cleansing process. We want to get off the table where we endure the painful probing process or the stinging rod. We strongly desire to resist God's chastening and go our own way. But we must not rush the Potter. We must submit to His will. Only as we surrender to God and allow Him to clean all the dross from our lives will we become vessels fit for the Master's use.

## **3. Shaping the clay**

After the clay is thoroughly cleaned, it is ready to go on the wheel. The potter forms the clay into a lump and places it on the wheel. He begins to turn it. As the lump spins, he moistens his hands and shapes the clay. The moisture is very important. If it's too dry, it will pucker and resist. If it is too wet, it will refuse to assume the shape the potter desires. Sometimes the clay is sticky and resists the potter's efforts. As he works the clay, he may smash it down and start over. He will do this until the vessel is formed to his liking. Sometimes the vessel will form correctly, but then as it nears completion it will collapse or wobble. Sometimes the potter will completely change directions and make a vessel quite different from what he started to make. He may take the broken piece of clay that collapsed and make an exquisite vessel from it. As the potter completes the vessel, he looks upon it with great joy. He can envision what it will be after the firing and finishing are done.

This process is rich in spiritual lessons. Sometimes we know what area the Potter is trying to change in our lives, but we resist Him. He is not able to make a vessel that is useful in His service because of our stubborn will. We need to allow His Spirit to work and shape our lives as He wants them. We need to develop a sensitivity to the Spirit's voice in our lives. We need to obey Him when He speaks to us.

Usually the problem isn't one of knowing what God wants. It is a problem of our wills. Sometimes in our stubbornness and arrogance, we continue to resist Him. How tragic that is, and what great harm it causes to our spiritual lives.

Sometimes we allow God to shape us at first. We yield to Him, but then we resist Him, and God has to return us to the wheel. Our service for Him is marred and broken. But, like the potter, God can see what will be in our lives. God is a specialist in taking broken, ruined pots and making precious vessels out of them. The secret lies in our confession, repentance, and submission to Him. If you have been marred or broken, don't despair. Allow God, the loving Master Potter, to mend and mold you into a beautiful vessel for His service.

This picture is a powerful encouragement for those of us who have failed in some area of our lives. All of us are subject to failure. Sometimes we wonder if God can ever use us again in His service. But the God we serve specializes in mending broken pots. If we confess and forsake our sins, He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9). Climb back onto the wheel and yield to the Master Potter Who can make a beautiful vessel again, useful in His service.

After the vessel is shaped, the potter takes a fine thread, moistens it, and draws it across the bottom of the spinning vessel. The thread separates the vessel from the lump. The timing of the separation is very important. The potter knows just when to draw the thread—not too soon or too late. The result is a vessel which is separated and on its own.

There are lessons we need to learn here. Sometimes we run ahead of God. We think we know His will, but we haven't checked it out with Him. Great harm is done to the cause of Christ because of our impatience. We need to learn to wait on the Lord.

Sometimes we have the opposite problem. We sit and sit, waiting for the Lord to send us into service. It is so important not to run ahead of God, but it is just as important to move when He calls—when you are asked to teach that class, or when you sense the Spirit asking you to speak to someone about Jesus. If you are having trouble discerning God's will for your life, pray for guidance, then begin to move in the direction He indicates. There are times when it is right to wait for God's leading. There are times when He says, "Wait." But when He clearly leads us to move, we must take up the task and begin moving. God wants us to move in His service so He can direct us to the path He chooses for us.

#### **4. Drying the container**

After the vessel is shaped and separated, the potter places it on the shelf for drying. The process slows to a halt at this stage. Before, there was lots of activity: digging, beating, probing, cleaning, forming, and spinning. Now there is rest. The unfired vessel will collapse if it is filled with water. It will break if it is handled roughly. The drying and resting are very important. The vessel will break and be useless if it is fired before it is properly dried.

This is an example of what often happens in our lives. Sometimes we experience periods of dryness in our spiritual lives. We seem to be on God's shelf, out of His service. God can use these times to prepare us for greater service. It is important that we rest and see what God is teaching us. It is important that we keep pursuing communion with God, even in the dry times. If we persist, we will break through into glorious fellowship with Him.

God can use these dry times in our lives to build maturity into us. He can teach us valuable lessons that will increase our usefulness to Him. Let's be patient when God places us on the drying shelf. Let's look forward to the many wonderful blessings which are being prepared for us in the eternal world.

## **5. Firing the container**

When the vessel has dried sufficiently, the potter places it in the kiln for the firing process. The temperature must be incredibly hot, approximately 2,000° Fahrenheit (1,100° Celsius) for the furnace to do its job. As it is heated, the vessel experiences changes in its molecular structure which make it useful and watertight. The vessel would dissolve if water were put into it before the firing. But after the firing, it will hold water for years. The vessel that was soft and easily marred becomes hard and durable. The fire that burned it caused it to become a useful vessel.

My wife and I had a soup bowl for approximately forty years. It developed a crazed cracking on the inside. We thought it was defective and took it back to the manufacturer. The representative explained that the bottom surface does not receive the coating of glazing that seals the surface of the piece. If the piece is allowed to stand in water for a length of time, it will absorb the moisture through its unglazed bottom surface. The moisture will migrate into the clay and eventually will cause crazing as it is heated and cooled during ordinary use.

As I thought of that, I thought about our spiritual lives. All of us have one or more areas where we have to battle with Satan. He knows exactly what our vulnerable areas are. He is an expert at tempting us in those areas. It is so important that we recognize those areas and avoid the temptation. It is important that we be accountable to someone in those areas and not give Satan a foothold. Like the clay piece, the damage will not happen all at once. It will be a slow process of letting down our guard here or making a small compromise there. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, Satan will steal our spirituality until we are cold and indifferent to God. We need to carefully guard our thoughts and our deeds in order to be certain Satan is not taking advantage of us.

Never allow yourself to engage in a small or seemingly harmless behavior that you know is sinful. Satan only needs a tiny crack in our Christian armor to get a foothold in our lives. The pores in the bottom of that pot are microscopic in size, but they are enough for the moisture to do its damage. We need to guard diligently the doors and windows of our minds so Satan doesn't enter.

Some of us are in God's furnace today. Our lives are filled with trial and heartache. We wonder if God still loves and cares for us. But, dear one, do not lose heart. God, the Master Potter, is perfecting and refining you into a beautiful vessel for His service. He knows how much heartache you can stand. He will not give you more than you can bear (1 Corinthians 10:13). Allow Him to wrap His arms of comfort around you. Lean on the everlasting arms of His mercy and allow Him to make you a vessel fit for His use.

There are some very comforting words for the weary in Isaiah chapter 40: "But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint" (Isaiah 40:31).

## 6. Using the container

After the vessel is fired, it is ready for use. The potter who makes the vessel as he sees fit determines the use of the vessel. From the same lump of clay, He can make a porcelain vase for a king's palace, or a garbage pot. Sometimes we aren't satisfied with how God made us, or the place He puts us for service. We need to gladly accept His will for our lives. Never argue with Him, and always serve Him wherever He puts you.

Paul says in Romans 9:20, "Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?" Of course the answer is no. How ungrateful it is for us to complain to a sovereign God about His will. How unseemly for the creature to complain to the Creator about how he or she was created.

The clay that yields to the potter's touch brings happiness and satisfaction to the potter. But the clay that will not yield to the potter's wishes is a constant source of frustration and irritation to him.

The vessel that is finished and useful is a source of joy to the potter. Just so, those who yield to God allow Him to cleanse the impurities from their lives, and gladly surrender to His will for their lives, will be a source of joy and pleasure to the Master Potter.

As we live our lives for our blessed Master, let's determine to be yielded clay in His hands. Let's allow Him to find us, clean out all the impurities from our lives, and shape us into a vessel He can use. Let's not complain when we find ourselves in God's furnace. Rather, let's allow the fire to do its work and then go forth to serve Him as beautiful vessels fit for the Master's use.

God, the Master Potter, is longing for each of us to yield to Him so He can shape us into beautiful vessels to be used in His kingdom. Will you continue to resist His will, causing pain and heartache to both Him and you? Or will you surrender your will to His desires and be a useful vessel for Him? The choice is yours!

-Daniel Lehigh

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### BIBLE HELPS

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