

# The Potter and the Clay

by J. Vernon McGee

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*God is the potter, and we are the clay, helpless and hopeless, but he has the power to shape and mold us into something new and beautiful.*

**Duration:** 41:37

**Scripture:** Jeremiah 18:1-6, Jonah 3:1-2, Mark 10:17-22, John 6:67-68, Romans 9:15, Ephesians 2:1-3, Hebrews 3:7-8

**Topics:** "Sovereignty Of God", "Repentance And Mercy"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher emphasizes the sovereignty of God and the importance of repentance. He uses the analogy of a potter and clay to illustrate how God has the authority and ability to shape individuals and nations. The preacher warns against turning away from God and hardening one's heart, as it leads to despair and separation from God. He emphasizes that it is only through casting oneself upon God's mercy and yielding to the Holy Spirit that one can be transformed and saved.

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## Transcript

The subject of the message of the morning is the potter and the clay. It was back in 1954, one Sunday night in March, that we invited a radio listener who was a potter to put on a demonstration here on the lower platform. He brought in a potter's wheel, which was turned by a foot pedal.

He put on that wheel clay, and while we were giving the message, he molded the clay into a vessel. It was a very simple experiment, but I always felt I made a mistake, because I'm confident the congregation that evening did not hear a word that I said. They were so intent watching this man making a vessel there on the potter's wheel.

And so this morning, we can call your attention to this passage without having the demonstration at all. God sent Jeremiah down to the potter's house not to hear a message, nor to give a message, nor to speak, but to see a sermon. I personally believe that the Bible is a picture book that actually God has given to you and me, and it's filled with pictures, and it's adapted to television as probably no other book is today.

And that's one of the reasons we have not attempted to preach, but we have attempted to picture that which we gave out, because we believe that's been God's method and is still God's method today. I remember several years ago, I'm afraid it was many years ago now, I was a student in seminary, and going from my home in Tennessee to the seminary in Dallas, Texas, I had to cross the state of Arkansas.

And crossing that state, I believe it was near Arkadelphia, there was a large pottery plant.

And one day I took time out with several other fellows that were with me to stop and go in and see them at work. May I say to you that there were two very impressive and striking objects there. Back of this plant, there was a, I suppose, as ugly batch of mud that you have ever seen.

It was shapeless. It looked hopeless to me. It was about as unattractive as anything could possibly be.

That was in back of the plant. Up front, they had a display room, and in that display room, they had some of the most exquisite and lovely vases. Some of them were actually vases.

The difference is \$25, they tell me. But whether they be vases or vases, they were lovely. They were beautiful.

Those were the two things that were impressive. And then we went inside the plant, and inside the plant, there were many potters. They were standing at wheels.

They were bent over them, some actually sitting down on stools. And the wheels were run by some sort of power. They didn't have to use a foot pedal or a hand crank.

They could give all their attention, and they were working with that helpless, hopeless, ugly, mushy, messy clay. And they were transforming it and translating it in objects of art. And the difference between that mass of mud and those lovely objects in the display room were these men, the potters, working over these wheels.

Now, my beloved, that's the same place that God sent this man, Jeremiah. He sent him down to see a sermon. And actually, it's a very simple sermon to catch.

You have no difficulty in identifying the potter, and you have no difficulty in identifying the clay. It's very easy. Fact of the matter is, God does it for us.

God is the potter, and Israel is the clay, in particular here, all mankind in general. Better still, I think we could say each individual is the clay. If I may be very personal this morning, you are clay on the potter's wheel.

Regardless of what else might be said about you this morning, you are clay today on the potter's wheel, as every man has been that's ever lived. Some were translated into lovely faces. Others were destroyed and pushed aside.

And the potter made the decision. Now, this is a figure of speech that is so impressive and so important that's picked up in the New Testament, given to us there with great force. Paul first, in Romans the ninth chapter, the twenty-first verse, lifts the figure of Jeremiah and says, Hath not the potter power over the clay, of the same lump to make one vessel unto honor, and another unto dishonor? God is the potter.

The clay is mankind. In second Timothy, the second chapter, twenty-first verse, Paul gives seven figures speaking of the believer. And this is one of them.

If a man therefore purge himself from these, he shall be a vessel unto honor, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work. This morning will you look with me at this figure of the potter under these two headings. First, the power of the potter and the personality of the clay.

And then we shall look at the personality of the potter and the power of the clay. First of all, let me say today that when God started off with mankind, He started with man as a giant potter, taking man and making him out of the very dust of the earth. God was a potter, a fashioned man.

My beloved, regardless of what you might think about yourself today, you're a creature, and I'm a creature. We have come forth from the hand of a creator who made us, and it's time today that we in America get that in our thinking again because that's what gave us our liberty, that we are creatures of a creator. I want to turn back this morning first to Genesis, the first chapter, the 26th verse.

Will you listen to this language? And God said, let us make man in our image after our likeness, and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, over the fowl of the air, over the cattle, over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creepeth upon the earth. So God created man in his own image. In the image of God created him.

Male and female created he them. The giant potter stood over the wheel one day of this little earth that was spinning around, and he lifted up just a little of the mud on this earth, and he formed and fashioned a man. We sometimes find fault with evolution for taking us back to the animal.

God takes us back lots lower than that. My friend, today you and I came physically out of the dust of the ground. That's our beginning.

Will you listen again in the second chapter as he tells about specifically how woman was formed. The Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon Adam, and he slept, and he took one of his ribs, closed up the flesh instead thereof, and the rib which the Lord God had taken from man made he a woman and brought her unto the man. Man and his wife were arguing one day.

Sometimes man and wife will argue. And she said, after all, she says, woman is much better looking than man is. And he said, I agree with that.

After all, he said, God practiced on the man first before he made the woman. And actually that's true. He formed the woman after he had formed the man.

And will you notice the conclusion of this in Genesis 3:19. In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread till thou return unto the ground, for out of it was thou taken, for dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return. On the physical side, man taken out of the dust of the ground and this giant potter, molded and fashioned man as he is today.

He is the potter. My friend, let's face it, you this morning had no choice at the period in history that you'd be born. You didn't decide the color of the pigment of your skin.

You didn't decide whether you would be male or female. You didn't decide today whether you would be six feet high or five feet high. Some of you have decided whether you're blonde or brunette.

But that's as far as your decision can go. You can't change the other because the potter has put you on the wheel and he's molded you. He never asked you or me.

Oh, the power of the potter. No one can stop this potter. No one can question his right.

No one can resist his will. No one can say him nay. No one can alter his plan.

No one can speak back. The little gingerbread boy could talk back, but man can't talk back. May I say to you, my beloved, you and I don't walk off until the potter has completed his work.

Nowhere in the Word of God will you find such a graphic picture of the sovereignty of Almighty God in this figure of the potter. We've forgotten in our days the rights of God. We've emphasized so much the rights of man.

Even today the worst racketeers in the country can plead the Fifth Amendment, but we do not give God permission to act as he pleases. We say he's bound. We say today God can't do certain things.

My beloved, this morning we need to remind ourselves that God has incontestable authority. He has irresistible ability to form and to fashion individuals and nations and the world and the universe, and if there are other universes, and if he wanted them, he'd fling them into space. He has that power.

He has that authority today. He's answerable to no one. He does not have to appeal to the Supreme Court.

He does not have to get a permit to do anything. He's free to act. Our God is free to act.

God has power to carry through his will, his inexorable will, his inflexible will. God can go through with what he's planned. He's answerable to no one.

He's sovereign. My beloved, he is an absolute dictator. This is his universe.

It's not yours. It's not mine. He made it, and we are told that he made everything after the counsel of his own will.

Paul's father says in Ephesians that he made it for the pleasure of his own will. You don't like this universe? God does. You better get in step.

This is his universe. He's running it. It's carrying out his purpose, not yours, not mine.

He's the potter. The universe is the clay on the wheel. The rebellion of man down here, and it's terrific from our viewpoint, but as far as God's concerned, it's just a tempest and a teapot.

He's not disturbed today. You can't surprise him. You can't deceive him.

You will not disturb him. God this morning rides triumphantly in his own chariot. Oh, my beloved, he's God today.

This is his universe. You and I are creatures. Will you listen to Paul in Romans 9, verse 19? Thou wilt say then unto me, why doth he yet find fault? For who hath resisted his will? Nay, but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed, say to him that formed it, why hast thou made me thus? Hath not the potter power over the clay of the same lump to make one vessel unto honor and another unto dishonor? God today has the power to carry through his will.

He doesn't have to wait for reinforcements to be brought up. He doesn't have to wait until he's able to get a little stronger. He doesn't have to build up his defenses.

God this morning can do anything that is the object of power. And he's not bound today. It was Dr. Lange, the great German scholar, that made this statement, when man goes the length of making to himself a

God whom he affects to bind by his own rights, God then puts on his majesty and appears in all his reality as a free God before whom man is a mere nothing like the clay in the hand of the potter.

Such was Paul's attitude when acting as God's advocate in his suit with Jewish Phariseism. A great many people today are acting as if God is somehow or another duty-bound to maintain America even. I say to you today, God is free to act.

Our God is riding triumphantly in his own chariot. He is not paying any attention to man's traffic signals. He's carrying out his purpose in this universe.

Will you look with me for just a moment at the personality of the clay? Somebody says, this certainly is a mixed metaphor that you've come up with today. Personality of the clay? Clay doesn't have personality. I know it.

Clay is formless. It's lifeless. It's shapeless.

It's a muddy mess. It's inept, inert, incapable of anything. It's gooey, not good.

You remember the psalmist says, he remembers that weird dust. And as Dr. George Gill used to say, man forgets it. And when dust gets stuck on itself, it's mud.

But thank God he remembers that we are dust and we'll do well to remember, my beloved, that we are dust today. That we are clay on a potter's wheel. And that we have no inherent ability that we are helpless and hopeless today.

Will you listen to Paul again in Ephesians 2-1 as he speaks to the Ephesians of their former condition? And it's your condition and mine before we came to Christ. And you hath he quickened who were dead in trespasses and sins. And I'm confident that there's no one here that's willing to maintain an argument that a corpse has any ability to do anything.

You and I were dead in trespasses and sins, wherein in time past we walked according to the course of this world, according to the prince of the power of the air, the spirit that now worketh in the children of disobedience, among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind, and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others. What a picture, my beloved. What a picture of the clay today and a picture of you and me.

Again, may I turn to Romans 9, and will you listen to the language in verse 15? For he saith to Moses, I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy, and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion. Will you hear me carefully this morning? God reminded Moses that even Moses had no claim on God. Think of that for a moment.

This is the man that was the deliverer. This is the man through whom God gave the law. This is the man that led the children of Israel for 40 years, and God would not let him enter the promised land because of a sin he committed.

God said to Moses, You have no claim on me, none whatsoever. Will you listen to me carefully now? So then, listen, so then, it's not of him that willeth, nor of him that runneth, but of God that showeth mercy. It's not in him that runneth.

It's not in working. It's not in willing. It's all in the mercy of God.

My friend, will you hear me today carefully now? If you are saved today, it's not because you willed it. It's not because you worked. It's not because of anything in you.

It's because God today showed mercy to you. He's free. He can save.

He's free to save. And if you were saved, it wasn't because you came upon the soft side of him and that you were a nice, sweet little boy and you said to him, Lord, I'm a good little boy. You'll have to receive me.

God says, I'm not obligated to receive anyone. When I save, it's because I extend mercy. And he's free to extend mercy.

If he's not, then he's not God. And my friend, it's not mercy. If he's obligated.

God saves today because he's merciful. Your silence in here today indicates that this is strong medicine for you. Will you go along with me now? We'll look at the other side of the picture.

Shall we look at the personality of the potter and the power of the clay? Will you listen to verse 6? Listen to this potter now. O house of Israel, cannot I do with you as this potter? Saith the Lord, behold, as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel. Will you listen now to verse 4? And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter.

So he made it again another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make it. Oh, hear me carefully today. If God were a cruel and arbitrary dictator, this would be the most terrifying truth that I know of.

I could think of nothing today that would be more terrible than this. I would rather be back at the Iron Curtain in Russia today than to be under a God who is cruel or brutal. This thing is repulsive if God's vindictive.

If he's motivated by a whim today and carried away by passion, if he is moving because he's petty, if he's moving today because he's prejudiced or because he's petulant or perfidious today, then I say to you that I don't want to have anything to do with him. I'm afraid of him today. Listen.

He made it again another vessel. Oh, the infinite patience of this potter. Will you listen? Romans 9, verse 14.

What shall we say then? Is there unrighteousness with God? Paul dismisses it. God forbid. Let it not be, he says.

You just can't say this thing. Nay, but, O man, who art thou that replyest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus? Now listen again carefully. You have no right to question God.

Did you know today when people stand up and say, I do not care for this doctrine of election. I think it's horrible and awful. You are blaspheming almighty God.

Who do you think God is? He's not God unless he has all power. He's not following the parade. He's leading it.

It never turns the corner till he turns the corner. He's not following the band. You blaspheme him when you say today this is terrible.

Paul says, you have no right. Is there unrighteousness with God? Listen to me. God acts with all wisdom.

God never does anything without bringing to bear all wisdom. He has all wisdom. He never makes a mistake.

Oh, how many times you and I do something and we have to look back and say, I made a mistake. If I'd only known. God knew, my beloved, he makes no mistakes.

He acts from all wisdom. That's not all. God has all love.

You see that mother bending over that little baby and you say, my, isn't mother love wonderful? Who gave her that love? God gave it to her. So you and I know something about his heart. And the mother love of that mother there is nothing compared to the love of God.

Our God moves by love. You have no right to question him. He acts with all wisdom.

He acts with all love. And that's not all the story. God is just in everything that he does.

Justice springs from him. He never does anything that's unjust. When you say that this is wrong and God shouldn't have done that, then you're blaspheming him.

God says everything he does is just. Anything that he does is right. Oh, I know.

Isn't that wonderful? He made it again another vessel. He could fling the clay from him and say, if that clay won't respond to me, I get rid of it. But he doesn't do that because he's all love.

He's all patience. He's all wisdom. He's all justice.

He makes it again another vessel. I do not mean to be irreverent, but have you ever stopped to think about this? If you were God, what would you do? Here's a universe that's rebelled against you. The clay didn't respond.

What would you do? I'll tell you what I'd do. I'd look down at this universe and say, let man go. I can make 10 trillion times as many men are down there, and I can make them all obedient to me.

Out of existence goes this little world, and I'd start over again. My beloved, I thank God he didn't do it. He's all wisdom.

He's all love. He's all justice. And so he took the clay and put it back on the potter's wheel, and he says, I'll fashion it again another, another one.

So when Adam sinned in the Garden of Eden, and God came down in the cool of the day, didn't say, well, I'm sorry, Adam, that you failed, but I'm through with you. Stand aside. I'll not go on.

God put him back on the wheel, and he fashioned him again. And you'll see him someday in heaven. Old Jacob sinned, and as far as I'm concerned, I wouldn't want Jacob around me.

You couldn't trust him. He's not to be trusted. Jacob, conniving, scheming.

God put him on the wheel, and that clay was brittle, and I say, fling him off. But God says, no. God took him and reformed him, reshaped him, and he made him a glorious vessel.

Then there was David. There are men down here on Pershing Square that will tell you tomorrow that God is immoral for taking David. Oh, I thank God he didn't fling David off of the potter's wheel.

He put David back again, and he formed and fashioned him again. John Mark failed. Jonah failed, and the most wonderful thing that's in the book of Jonah, the book of Jonah says he was swallowed.

But God wasn't through with that man. The word of the Lord came unto Jonah again the second time. The doctor out here in Babel Hills wrote me.

He says, when you gave that verse, it was just like water to a thirsty soul. I thought God was through with me. I say to you today, God's not through with you.

He'll put the clay back on and try it again, and he'll try it a third time, and he'll try it a fourth time. He's been putting me back on the wheel for years. I don't know how far along we are now.

Peter, when he failed the Lord and he came into shore, he says, oh, depart from me, for I'm a sinful man. What Peter really said was this, oh, Lord, why don't you get rid of me? I failed you so much. Why don't you get somebody you can depend on? But this wonderful potter, the Lord Jesus took him and put him back on the potter's wheel.

And aren't you glad he did? And he says to you and me today, you are a marred, scarred vessel. And that's the reason he says, ye must be born again. You've got to come back and up and under my hands again.

The Holy Spirit will mold your fashion and make you new. The personality of the potter. Isn't he a wonderful potter? You can trust him.

You can have confidence in him. It's glorious that he's who he is today. I don't know about you, but every now and then, I thank God that he's who he is.

Oh, God, I thank you that you're who you are. He could have been something else, but he's not. Will you look now in closing very briefly to the power of the clay? You mean to tell me that that gooey, lifeless, inner clay has power? Yes, it does.

The condition of the clay is the determining factor in its ultimate destiny. Will you listen again? I go back now to Romans 9. This is the strongest passage in the Bible on election. Will you listen to it? For the scripture saith unto Pharaoh, even for this same purpose have I raised thee up, that I might show my power in thee, and that my name might be declared throughout all the earth.

Therefore hath he mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he harden. Will you look at this for a moment now? Oh, follow this very carefully. Did God harden the heart of Pharaoh and not give him a chance? Five times in the book of Exodus, it says that Pharaoh hardened his own heart.

I'll only give you two of those passages. In Exodus, the 8th chapter, the 15th verse, But when Pharaoh saw that there was respite, he hardened his heart, and hearken not unto them, as the Lord had said. And then in the 9th chapter, when you get near to the end of God dealing with him, will you listen to this? And when Pharaoh saw that the rain and the hail and the thunders were ceased, he sinned yet more, and hardened his heart.

He and his servants. The heart of Pharaoh was hardened, neither would he let the children of Israel go, as the Lord had spoken by Moses. Five times it says he hardened his heart, and then in retribution, God says he hardened his heart.

In Exodus, the 10th chapter, it says, And the Lord said unto Moses, Go in unto Pharaoh, for I have hardened his heart. God has never yet hardened a man's heart that didn't first harden his own heart. God just puts it in the vice and makes him stand the test, and that's all that that means.

This man was given an opportunity to turn to God. Everybody around Pharaoh saw the ultimate end of his resistance, and all of them advised him to give in. The magicians came to him and said, This is the finger of God, and they fled.

His servants came to him and said, Let these people go. Even he relented after each plague and said he'd let them go. And one time, Pharaoh himself cried out, I have sinned this time.

The Lord is righteous. He was given an opportunity. The potter put him on the wheel and he put him on once.

He put him on twice. He put him on that ten times. How many times do you want the potter to try it? Gave him ten times.

Judas was with the Lord Jesus three years, like the other disciples, in his very company. He was not hardened, even at the very end. Our Lord said to him, Wherefore, friend, art thou come? It's not too late for you to turn that awful burning traitor's kiss into a kiss of acceptance.

Hardened means to reach the place in your life that you can no longer distinguish between right and wrong. You can't tell the true from the false. My friend, today there are people that cross over that border.

There are men today that can't tell the difference between right and wrong. Will you listen to this little poem? It has a message. There is a time I know not when, a place I know not where, which marks the destiny of men to glory or despair.

There is a line by us unseen which crosses every path, the hidden boundary between God's patience and God's wrath. To cross that limit is to die, to die as if by stealth. It may not pale the beaming eye nor quench the glowing health.

The conscience may be still at ease, the spirit's light and gay. That which is pleasing still may please and care be thrust away. But on that forehead God hath set indelibly a mark by man unseen, for man as yet is blind and in the dark.

And still that doomed man's path below may bloom like Eden bloomed. He did not, does not, will not know nor feel that he is doomed. He feels, he says, that all is well.

His every fear is calmed. He lives, he dies, he wakes in hell, not only doomed but damned. Oh, where is that mysterious bowing by which each path is crossed beyond which God himself hath sworn that he who goes is lost? How long may men go on in sin? How long will God forbear? Where does hope end and where begin the confines of despair? One answer from the skies is sent.

Ye who from God depart, while it is called today, repent and harden not your heart. The Lord Jesus said to his disciples, this one who is the potter, he said to them, will you also go away? They could have gone.

They said to him, to whom shall we go? Thou hast the words of eternal life.

The rich young ruler came to the Lord Jesus and our Lord told him what he must do and it says he went away sorrowfully and our Lord stood right there and let him go. He didn't say, let's sing 14 more stanzas of the hymn and see if somebody won't come. My beloved this morning, you can turn your back on him.

You can shake your fist at heaven today. You can quote the poem and say it matters not how straight the gate, how charged with punishment the scroll. I'm the master of my fate.

I'm the captain of my soul. You can say that. And I say to you this morning, a potter will push you off the wheel.

He's the potter, not you, not I. But this morning you can cast yourself upon his mercy. It's not him that runneth. It's not him that willeth, but it's God who showeth mercy.

You can cast yourself upon his mercy. You can yield to the sweet influences of the Holy Spirit. You can put yourself in his tender hands and he'll mold you and shape you.

But he's the potter. Don't forget, he's the potter. You and I are clay.

O, to yield to him. If you resist him, he has one alternative, he says, pushes you off of the wheel.

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