

Extreme Makeover **(Going Home Edition)** **Jeremiah 18:1-6**

¹This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: ²"Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message." ³So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. ⁴But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him. - Jeremiah 18:1-4

To Elijah, God revealed Himself by a small still voice; to Jacob, in a dream. To Moses, the great *I Am* spoke the first time through a burning bush, but eventually, face to face.

In view of these wonderful mediums for revelation, a trip to the potter's house might have seemed less than spectacular to Jeremiah. When you go on vacation, you might visit a replica village of a bygone era and watch some old-world craftsman do his thing. That's neat - to us. But, Jeremiah WAS old-world. There was nothing novel to him about potters. It would be like God telling me to go to the secretary's office to watch Barb stamp envelopes until I show Myself. Whoopee!

Even as Jeremiah describes what he sees, nothing unusual happens. A potter is working at his wheel with a piece of clay. There is a flaw as it takes shape, so the potter smashes his first effort and starts over again with the same lump of clay. No doubt, this happened dozens of times a week at an ancient pottery shop. Of course, not being a potter himself, Jeremiah may have noticed that the potter reacted more patiently than he might have under the same circumstances. Had he been that potter, and depending on how long he had been working on that particular vessel, Jeremiah might have thrown that lump of clay up against the wall in disgust, kicked his wheel and started over the next day with a fresh lump of clay and a fresh cast on his foot.

There would have been nothing unjust had the potter thrown a little tantrum and discarded that stupid glob of clay. It was his clay, his wheel, his prerogative – but potters know what they are dealing with when they work with clay. And, of course, when God did finally reveal His point, Jeremiah may have actually been moved by the fact that this potter did not lose his patience. He salvaged the same lump of clay, making "... another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him."

⁵Then the word of the LORD came to me: ⁶"O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter does?" declares the LORD. "Like clay in the hand of the potter, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel. - Jeremiah 18:5, 6

God called Israel out from the nations of the world to bless them. He called them to be a witness in the world of His holiness and goodness, but time and again, His people turned to other gods. In fact, the term "Israel" is used here only in a spiritual sense. Long before Jeremiah, God's nation had divided. The northern half that actually took the name "Israel" had ceased to exist because of its sin. Jeremiah spoke to the southern nation that remained, known as "Judah." His message was a forewarning of the destruction of Judah if that nation did not repent. For God to refer to "Israel" reminded Jeremiah that by any name, this nation was God's possession.

Jeremiah now has his word from the Lord. His job is to ask God's people, "Is the Lord to be denied the privileges of a common potter? Is that not a fair trade-off for not giving up on you altogether?" God would have been justified to toss this nation aside. In the final analysis, the Parable of the Potter teaches that God is sovereign and can do with any of us as He pleases. But there is a kinder truth behind the story as well. If His people repent in their brokenness, He keeps working with them. God never discarded His people though their rebellion did result in seven decades of captivity in a foreign land. Still, God kept His purposes alive for this nation until finally, He brought forth His Savior, Jesus into the world.

God fashioned and refashioned Israel until His promises were fulfilled both to them and to the world. This is the meaning of the parable of the Potter in its original setting. However, this metaphor of God's sovereignty and grace is obviously applicable to believers of every age. He is a Potter. We are His clay. Lovingly, persistently, He fashions us as seems "best to him."

I. Marred in a Damaged Creation

A. Generally Speaking, We Are Marred by Sin

We were not created as marred beings. When God breathed life into Adam, He raised him to stand upright and holy. We are fashioned in the image of God. Have you ever reflected upon those words, "the image of God"? Can you even picture yourself as being that truthful, that loving, that inwardly pure or that outwardly whole? Can you picture yourself as not a sinner in any respect? We can dream and conceive of victory over our most deplorable vices, but every heart remains filled with sin and selfishness that we have not yet even identified. "The image of God" is how God's Word describes our original state. And, because of what a Master Potter can do, we also have a glimpse of what our final condition will be, perfect holiness once again.

Generally speaking, we are marred by sin, but what does that mean, specifically? Sometimes we are content to speak generally of our sin and generally of God's holiness and generally of the broken humility that these truths demand of us. That way we never have to think very hard or be very troubled about our need for an extreme makeover. But, until we are thoroughly and completely honest about our sinful condition, the necessity of a Master Potter Who wields absolute sway over our destinies can never be as meaningful to us as it was to Jeremiah.

B. Specifically, Sin Marred our Understanding

We were made "a little lower than the angels." Had we remained unfallen, I suspect that we would understand much more of God and His world than we do. How many of science's advances against nature are only necessary because sin broke this world in the first place? How many of the things that science has discovered about creation would its Maker and our Friend have simply showed us if we still walked with Him as did Adam? And, given all the things that we have learned about this natural world, are there still not far more things that we do not know?

As little as a man really knows, it's amazing how quickly he becomes conceited in the smattering of knowledge he has. How easily we forget that the greatest minds of this world are really in a sinfully dark place. But nowhere is this truer than in matters of the spiritual realm. Paul writes:

"The man without the Spirit does not accept the things that come from the Spirit of God for they are foolishness to him, and he cannot understand them, because they are spiritually discerned."
1 Corinthians 2:14

When we become Christians, we receive the Holy Spirit as an indwelling presence. That does not mean that every believer listens to the Holy Spirit. Our old natural man contends with the Holy Spirit for our understanding and sadly, we too often avail ourselves to the popular ideas of the age than we do to hearing, learning, receiving and standing upon God's truth. Even as Christians, our spiritual understanding is darkened when we are not selective about the voices we heed.

C. Specifically, Sin Marred the Bent of our Wills

Some people are so committed to their own prideful and impulsive wills that they act in ways that ultimately don't serve their interests. Police in Los Angeles caught a break when a robbery suspect just couldn't control himself. When each man in the lineup was asked to repeat the words, "Give me all your money or I'll shoot," the man shouted, "That's not what I said!"

Made in the image of God, man's will was in harmony with that of his Creator. But, our sin declared war on God's will. Our fallen thinking became as contrary to the will of God as light is to darkness. We have been crucified with Christ, but from time to time, self-will rises up, and in spite of our best intentions, some trial or hardship will have its way as we rebel against God's will and assert our own. Paul understood this struggle within and it caused him to cry out:

"What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?" - Romans 7:24

D. Specifically, Sin Marred our Affections

In Eden, Adam's affections were always fixed upon proper objects, but now the scene has changed. Sometimes, we love the things we should avoid at all costs. Sometimes, we are indifferent to the things Jesus would have us to love the most dearly. Sometimes, we hope and dream for things that a spiritually enlightened heart should view with indifference or even fear.

How twisted can our affections be? A group of hunters paired off in twos. That night one hunter returned alone, staggering under an eight-point buck. "Where's Harry?" he was asked. "Harry had a stroke or something. He's a couple of miles back, moaning." "You left Harry lying there, and carried the deer back?" "Well," said the hunter, "I figured no one was going to steal Harry."

In this world, there are people so unrestrained in satisfying their material, sexual and social appetites that it is not farfetched to call them animals. The least beast-like people on earth should be those of us who walk in fellowship with God, but even David, that man after God's own heart, spoke of himself, saying, "I was senseless and ignorant; I was a brute beast before you" (Psalm 73:22). Our propensity for fixating our affections on the things of this earth and our eagerness to make provision for our fleshly lusts, prove that we still have a bit of the unregenerate beast in us. Our mental passions - anger, hatred, bitterness, envy - equally prove us to be a bit brutish.

E. Specifically, Sin Marred our Physical Bodies

In no respect is our imperfection more evident than in respect to our physical bodies. God built the human body. Even in its fallen state, the wonder of His divine handiwork is evident. But again, because of sin, we are marred. This body as well as the mind is subject to wearing down.

Two elderly women were discussing the problems of growing older. One commented, "The worst thing is when your memory starts to go. I've known you all my life, and right now, I can't even think of your name. What is it?"

The second lady thought for a moment and said, "Do you need an answer right now?"

Ultimately, this body encounters physical death. There are only a few occasions when the Bible depicts Jesus as weeping, but He was “the man of sorrow acquainted with grief.” Like us, seasons of His life were accompanied by laughter and celebration, but He was also no stranger to tears. The most renowned occasion of grief for Jesus occurs on the occasion of physical death. At the tomb of His friend Lazarus, John succinctly records: “Jesus wept” (John 11:35). I don’t know that He wept because His friend was dead. After all, Lazarus would not stay dead. But, I do think that this picture of Jesus was reserved for a grave because death, more than anything, proved that man, by his own sin, was marred. Death is the cruelest evidence of our fall from God’s image.

Maybe we should pause and weep with Jesus before we move on. This has been a rather glum review of the damage that sin brought upon what was once the crowning achievement of God’s creation. “God made man in his own image.” Never was so much expressed in so few words, not only in regard to the glory of the Creator, but also in regard to the severity of sin and the gravity of the Fall. Man was created righteous and holy, but he became a marred piece of clay. It warrants a tear or two. But it also warrants joyful trust in the One Who can repair us.

II. Molded by a Diligent Craftsman

A. Our God Is Redeeming Us for Heaven

In past sermons, I have asked the question, “Why does God leave us here once He has saved us?” Why does He not just forgive us of our sins and take us to heaven? Ordinarily, that question has been couched in an agenda of evangelism. God leaves us here for now so that we will work to bring as many with us to heaven as we can. That is true, but there is a second and equally practical reason that God does not save us and take us home in one gesture. Are you sure you’re ready for life in Heaven? Are you sure that you would really enjoy it up there?

Because of the limitations of our mental capacities to capture what heaven is really like, the Bible describes it in images we can grasp. In *Revelation*, it is described as a huge city. To the Jewish disciples of Jesus, it is described in terms of Abraham’s bosom or as a great banquet. To the thief on the cross, it was described as a Paradise. Permit me to submit this thought for your consideration. Heaven is a state as well as a place. It is the home of the holy, not just those called to be holy because they are covered by Jesus’ blood, but those who are authentically made holy.

In other words, are you sure you’d like it there as you are right now? After all, whatever selfishness remains in you will be out of place. Whatever fallen affections you have now will never be honored or satisfied there. To render us suitable for heaven, this “marred clay,” this depraved nature of ours, must undergo an extreme makeover, the “going home edition.” Our minds must be enlightened. Our wills must be broken. Our affections must be redirected. Old things really must pass away.

This moral change is called sanctification, or being made holy, and it a work that only God can do and only in His time. Sure, God leaves us here to lead others to Him, but He also leaves us in the world so that by His hand, we might be fashioned in all things, back into His image, so that we will find Heaven to be a home and not just a place where we can never really quite feel comfortable – never quite sure if we are allowed to walk on the carpet or sit on the furniture.

B. How Is This Great Change Brought about in Us?

The biblical answer to this question of “How” is that a Master Potter shapes us “in all things”:

²⁸And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. – Romans 8:28, 29

We are foolish and reckless to speak of horrible catastrophes such as hurricanes or terrorist attacks that happen on a grand scale as God’s judgment or endorsement of this or that. Preachers who should know to put their hands over their mouths occasionally pop-off to the effect that this or that disaster is a judgment against this or that group of sinners – not because they are right or wrong, but because they cannot possibly know if they are right or wrong. God alone knows if He sends or if He allows this or that disaster for this or that reason. Jesus scolded the Pharisees of His day for making such arrogant declarations when bad things happened to others. And, He does not make known to modern-day Pharisees every specific of His sovereign wisdom and discipline.

Our great joy is to be found in the promise of what God is doing with His people “in all things.” In the good and bad of life, God is working for the good as He molds us to be like Jesus. He does discipline us because He is a loving Father. He sends to us the Holy Spirit to come alongside of us, whatever our need, and to make sense of our weak, uninformed and rattled prayers before the throne of God. He sends trials into our lives that will build us and He shelters us from trials that would destroy us. He destroys our appetites for this world and causes us to hunger for heaven.

Jesus died for our sins to secure our destiny as holy people, and we are already regarded as righteous by God because Jesus, Who died in our place, is righteous. But, there is a work of making us holy in actuality, which is often dismissed by Christians. It is the work of the Potter.

Let me ask you Jeremiah’s question” “Is the Lord to be denied the privilege of a potter in your life? You know what a body of sin and death you carry about with you. Can you humbly concede that before you can arrive on heaven’s shore, there is work to be done - not your work - but God’s work in you? But, take heart. You are in safe hands, for ... “he who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus” (Philippians 1:6).

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