

Transcript of Sermon By
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First Baptist Church
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The Potter and the Clay

Jeremiah 18:1-11

Meditation Text:

And this is true of our individual lives. If some hard circumstance comes into your life -- and it may be there right now, or it may be just around the corner, or you may just have passed through it—that circumstance is the wheel of God, to bring you against the pressure of the Potter’s hand. If you do not resist, if your will does not spoil the work by murmuring, grumbling, or complaining, or feeling resentful and bitter, but you accept the working of the Potter, then the pressure is relieved, and the vessel takes shape. —Ray Stedman

One of the first lessons we learn in human nature is that most people don’t change. We know this, in part, from ourselves. We know this from the countless times we have tried to reform our habits—biting fingernails, smoking, addictions, and other things that we don’t like about ourselves. We try to change and then we find ourselves right back where we were. Most of the times that we have tried to change, we have failed. Most people don’t change.

We know this also from friends and family who are constantly moaning and complaining about things they wish were different in their lives. People offer them a suggestion and it almost seems they would prefer the moaning and the complaining to any effort that it might take to actually do something differently. Most people don’t change.

We know that abusers, typically, continue to abuse. People who are lazy rarely get an energetic streak and change their lives and do more. If someone ever tells us a lie, more often than not, instead of saying, *That person lied to me*, we typically describe them as a liar. We expect that what they did once, they are going to continue to do. Most people don’t change.

This is a rather sad thing to say when we believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ. What is the good news of Christ except that God has the power to change lives? We believe that a person can repent. A person can offer his life to God and God will indeed change him and *make all things new*. That is what we preach and proclaim. One of the key words of our faith is *conversion*. A person was once one way but is now another way.

If we look in the New Testament, great examples of our faith would be Peter, once a coward who became a leader of the early church; Paul, once a murderer who participated in the stoning of Stephen who later became a martyr.

Then there are the persons we know, the people we recognize as having been one way but somehow God comes into their lives and now they are different but they seem to be the odd one. We find that the message of the Gospel is at odds with our experiences in life. We know that Jesus Christ can change lives, but when we look around at all the attempts where people have wanted to be different, we know that most people don't change.

Over the next 15 months, much of my preaching is going to be guided by great texts, passages of scripture that we either ought to know or passages that we are somewhat familiar with that we ought to know where they are. Most of us are familiar with the idea that God is the potter and we are the clay, if not from reading Jeremiah while having breakfast this morning, then from having heard the hymn in church, *Have thine own way, Lord, thou art the potter, I am the clay.*

We turn to the prophet Jeremiah. He is one of the examples in the Old Testament where a prophet is given some object lesson. Ezekiel is big with this, too. Many of the prophets get object lessons where God shows them something and then says, *Let me explain what this means to you.*

Jeremiah is lead to go down the street and he passes a potter's house. Those of you who are involved in art know how it works or you have seen it in the movies where you pump with your feet, the bottom wheel spins, the pottery spins, and you can shape it. This is really part of a much longer passage. At the potter's house, Jeremiah sees the potter shape the clay. If he is not happy with it, he can take the clay and reshape it again. He can make, rework, and remake again. The word of the Lord to the nation of Judah in which Jeremiah lives is, *Can I not do to you as the potter does to the clay?*

Most of us get our theology more from the hymn than we do from the Bible, and for most of us, this is a personal word about how God can change our lives which is true. However, the hymn is all peace and light. There is actually a little darkness in the passage. To boil it down as simply as possible, what God says is that there are two possibilities. One is that people will repent and God has the ability to reshape their lives. The other is that people will rebel and continue to go their own way. This is not very popular to say but God creates an instrument for their reproof. This is really a lot nicer than what we would really like to say.

On the dark side, there is a reluctance and a rebellion to be subject to God's will, but on the bright side, God can remake us. God says, *If you will repent, then I will make you into good. If you are rebellious, I will find a way to correct you. I will find a way to turn this into a way to correct you.* Look at verse 12. The sad part is that when given this option, the people said, *It is no use. We will follow our own plans and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our evil way.* Here with this great acted out message about the power of God, I have the ability to do to you as the potter does to the clay. I have the ability to rework, remake, and reshape your life. I have the power to make things good and better. But the truth is most people don't change.

They say, *It is no use. We will follow our own plans and each of us will act according to the stubbornness of our own evil will.* Isn't that why we don't change? We are stubborn.

I am determined that if a person is strong willed and they agree with us, we call that *strong willed*. If they are strong willed and disagree with us, we call that *stubborn*. That means we can't get them to change their minds. In this particular case in our relationship to God, we are stubborn. If God has the power to raise Christ from the dead, then why do we not believe that God can change a life? Of course. Why on earth do we continue in the stubborn ways of our own evil will when such things are possible?

I look at it and I think that the essence of stubbornness is fear and pride. I don't know if you have ever heard the expression *self talk* but this is what psychologists tell us that we say to ourselves when we think we are not saying anything. Self talk is what goes on in our mind when we are driving down the street or watching TV, and we are saying things to ourselves. I will tell you that there is some pretty whacky self talk that goes on.

Think about this: Why is it that an eight-year-old who acts out in class and gets in trouble says to himself—*I would rather get in trouble and have negative attention than have no attention at all?* We all know that he is just trying to get attention. Why on earth does a child say this to himself unless it is based on fear?

Why does an 18-year-old girl say to herself in moments of silence, *My life is worthless and I should just destroy it.* Then she goes to a room by herself and cuts herself. There are teenagers who do that, kids who hurt themselves because they believe that their lives are so worthless. What goes on in that mind?

What goes on in the mind of a father who would molest his own child and then tell people, *I do it out of love?* You have seen this and read about it, people who think these things. That is some pretty whacky self talk. Most of it is based upon fear and pride.

There are times when given a situation in our lives we are so afraid that we are not going to get the love, affection or attention that we need desperately and this causes us to do the most bizarre things. That is the fear.

What about the people who come to the point in a marriage where it is about to break up and they would rather blame each other than face the fear of accepting their own responsibility for what has taken place. This is not always the case, but for some people it is.

Family members have not spoken to each other for years, and people who used to be friends now hate each other. As a Christian, a person thinks, *Maybe I could make up, but what is everybody going to say after I haven't spoken to this person for ten years? I can't let that break down. People will laugh at me. People will say I was wrong.* So out of fear that somehow people will judge us or that we won't get what we wanted or pride that won't let us break down and do what we know could be possible to make up, we just don't it. We are stubborn. We would rather live with the pain than say, *God, here is my life. You take my life and change it, reshape it, and make it what you will.*

God is the potter and we are the clay, but the truth of the passage in Jeremiah is that the clay has to be willing to be shaped. What can God do? What God won't do is shape us beyond us our response. If we refuse to be reshaped, we are a cold stone in the hand of God and not clay. We are a cold stone that will stay the way it has always been because we would rather stick to our pride and not face our fears in our stubborn, evil will. God cannot break that down and do anything about it. The unfortunate thing is that most of us would rather stay a cold stone than let God shape us anew.

When people are ready to put something back together in their lives and they come and talk to me about circumstances in their lives, they are ready to face the truth about something that must be faced in order for them to move forward and allow God to do something in their lives. One of the things I always try to do is to praise them for their courage and strength of spirit that it takes to face these things and to face what pain might come in allowing God to change them in order to be rid of the certain pain that has been a part of their lives thus far. I commend them because most people don't change and most people won't do that.

Today, I would just simply say to you, have you tried to change? Have you wanted God to change you only to let that self talk that goes on in your mind say, *I want to be changed, but I am not going to admit I was wrong. I want to be changed, but I am afraid what somebody might think after the way I have carried forth this excessive vendetta all my life. What am I supposed to say to people now? I'm a Christian; I decided I would repent of that?*

If we would but allow God, God can put us on that wheel and God can spin us, shape us, and make things new. If we don't believe that, then why on earth do we believe in Christ? Christ went to the cross, was dead, and buried. If we believe that God can transform Christ into a new resurrected life so that all who are in Christ might live with Christ always, then do we not believe that God can be stronger than our fear, stronger than our pride, and make us new.

Have thine own way, Lord, have thine own way. Thou art the potter, we are the clay. With willing hearts, we allow you to shape us to what you know is best and what we always hoped could be.

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