

The Potter and the Clay

by Phillip Keller

Phillip Keller's sermon illustrates how God shapes and molds our lives like a potter with clay, emphasizing the importance of our response to His touch and the role of His Word in our transformation.

Duration: 33:16

Scripture: Psalm 40:1

Topics: "Christian Life"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker shares a personal experience of visiting a potter in a bazaar. The potter is a skilled craftsman and the speaker expresses interest in learning about his process. As the potter works on the wheel, the speaker notices that the potter's face is filled with hope and anticipation for the beautiful creation he is making. However, at one point, the potter's work is marred due to resistance, and he has to start over. This experience leads the speaker to reflect on the verse from Jeremiah about the potter and the clay, realizing that resistance can hinder the work of God in our lives.

Transcript

For our morning reading shall we turn to a number of passages from God's Word, please. First of these is in Psalm 40.

Psalm 40 and the first three verses.

I waited patiently for the Lord and he inclined unto me and he heard my cry and he brought me up also out of an horrible pit out of the miry clay and he set my feet upon a rock and he established my goings and he hath put a new song in my mouth even praise unto our God many shall see it and fear and shall trust in the Lord then will you please turn over to Isaiah 48 verse 9 for my name's sake will I defer mine anger and for my praise for my praise will I refrain for thee that I cut thee not off behold I have refined thee but not with silver I have chosen thee in the furnace of affliction for mine own sake even for mine own sake will I do this because God's reputation is at stake in us for how should my name be polluted and I will not give my glory or my reputation or my honor unto another

then to book of Jeremiah Jeremiah chapter 18 beginning at verse 1 the word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord saying arise and go down to the potter's house and there I will cause thee to hear my words and then I went down to the potter's house and behold the potter wrought a work on the wheels and the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter so he made it again another vessel as

seemed good to the potter to make it then the word of the Lord came to me saying O house of Israel can I not do with you as this potter saith the Lord behold as the clay is in the potter's hand so are ye in my hand O house of Israel and then one last reference over in the New Testament please 2nd Timothy chapter 2 verse 19 nevertheless the foundation of God standeth sure having this seal

or this mark upon it the Lord knows them that are his and let everyone that nameth the name of Christ depart from iniquity but in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and of silver but also vessels of wood and of earth or of clay some are to honor and some to dishonor and if a man therefore purge himself from these he shall be a vessel unto honor sanctified fit for the master's use prepared unto every good work this is a simple message it's really more of a story than it is a preaching message which has had an enormous impact on my life and it's how God molds men and women how God molds men and women one of the things that I'm realizing increasingly as I move on in the Christian life is that an individual either goes on with God and becomes something of value in his hands or

stand still or in some cases actually retrogresses depending on whether or not that individual will respond to the touch of God upon their lives and that's really what this is all about shall we pray then before we have the little story our gracious God and our Heavenly Father may the words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart be acceptable in your sight this morning O God not only that you might be pleased but that this people might be blessed that you would speak to them in clear unmistakable terms that they can transfer to their own lives which will prove to be relevant in their own lives and from which great good will eventually come good that will last down not only through the remainder of their lives but all well on into eternity because you've taken something simple and

used it this morning I thank you for doing this I pray it in Christ's name but I pray it for our sakes amen about 14 years ago I was on an assignment into the Orient photographing and writing and one of the places which I was asked to visit was Western Pakistan and I was sent away up into the northwest corner of this territory into the very fabled and famous country of the Khyber Pass where the well-known and very beautiful Patan people live the Patans are an offspring of the early Greek conquerors who swept all across the Middle East and down into India under Alexander the Great and the brave and bold Greek warriors intermarried with the very very beautiful and winsome Indian ladies and produced a new race of people who are light-skinned blue-eyed and exceedingly fierce and these people

all lived in small live in small walled fortresses and all every man packs a rifle and their headquarters is the city of Peshawar and I was in this particular city when the missionary whom I was to visit there asked me one morning if I'd care to go down and actually watch one of his friends who was a very skilled potter work in his shop I had never ever watched a man make pottery and I was delighted so we went down into the bazaar along these winding dusty streets with all these bearded fierce-looking Patan people strolling up and down the streets with their bandoliers full of bullets and everyone packing a rifle and finally I was ushered into a little sort of tumbledown potter shop the missionary introduced me to this old gentleman he was a very old man a marvelous craftsman when I

looked around the shelves of his little shop I saw some of the most beautiful China I had ever seen anywhere in the world and he introduced me and the man was very very proud and pleased to think that a foreigner would drop into his humble place to see him go to work and I made it clear from the outset I said not I'm very interested in what you're doing I want to know everything everything that you do from the very first step to the very completion I said I have lots of time and I'd love to see you do your work he intimated to me that as a boy he had been sent up into China way over the Hindu Kush mountains to learn

his trade as an apprentice to a Chinese potter you may not realize this but the reason we call fine pottery China is because that's where it was first made that's where the

name originated it came from China and this old gentleman he was stooped and gray and bony beckoned to me and he said now this is where the work starts and he took me to the back of his little shop and opened a rickety door to a little black shed back there and as he opened the door a dreadful aroma came out of this black black room it was like the black hole of Calcutta and he had a little tiny oil lamp and he suspended it down into this hole and I saw that this is where he tramped the clay for his China was in this dark hole and he'd been in there previously tramping the clay mixing it with straw and various kinds of grasses to improve its colloidal content and it was a nauseating putrefying smell that came out of there and he leaned down and he reached down with his long hands and he

felt around amongst these lumps of clay for the longest time picking out with tremendous care and attention a piece of clay that would exactly suit his purpose I was amazed at this I was amazed how fussy he was in fact everything he did that day impressed me with how meticulous he was how careful he was how painstaking he was and how tender he was in his work and that's when this verse came to me that I read to you from Jeremiah where the Lord said to Jeremiah I want you to go down to the potter's house and there I will cause thee to hear my words I didn't realize it but that morning I was going to get a message that came through clearer to me than any message I've ever heard in a church that came to me clearer than anything I've ever heard from a pulpit or through a preacher and the

first thing that impressed me as I saw him leaning down picking out clay out of that pit was this passage in Psalm 40 I cried out I cried out and you lifted me out of the pit and out of the horrible miry clay you reached down that's where you found me Oh God you reached down and found me in that kind of a situation and you picked me out with great care from the darkness and the despair of my old life and after he'd found a lump of clay just about that would fit his hand and he had long fingers and a bony hand why he took it and he walked over to where his wheel was now his wheel wasn't a sophisticated piece of equipment like you see in Potter shops here his wheel was a hand carved stone carved right out of the cliffs of his own Hindu Kush mountains there a large piece of granite had been

hand cut and it was arranged on a very crude sort of treadle like apparatus very much like our old-fashioned sewing machines remember the old treadle machines that your mother ran well that's how it was operated and the next thing that surprised me was that he took endless pain centering this lump of clay he molded it roughly in his hand but centering it exactly in the center of that wheel I was surprised he didn't just plop it down he centered it very very carefully right in the exact center of this wheel on this stone and gradually he began to work the treadle and the wheel began to swirl very slowly and very gently and again that passage from Psalm 40 came home to me with great impact because I had never thought of it in this light before he brought me up also out of an horrible pit

out of the miry clay and he set me on my feet upon a rock and he's established my going and it came home to me then that it isn't until God picks an individual up and re-centers that individual's life in himself on himself actually puts him in a new setting so to speak most of us are completely egocentric people and we have to become Christo-centric centered in Christ instead of centered in self and that's the first time that passage from Psalm 40 verses 1 & 2 began to really make sense to me and this is what this potter was doing you see he couldn't shave any kind of a vessel down in the mud hole he had to put the mud on the rock in order to bring something out of it of beauty a lot of us have the idea you know in life that we can just carry on in our old way of living and that somehow

God's at work on us without ever getting centered into Christ I'm telling you it doesn't work that way and as he began to spin this wheel faster and faster I for one because I've never seen pottery shaped before I was amazed at how rapidly a beautiful goblet began to emerge under his hands but the thing that surprised me was that as I watched his face because I'm a very observant person as I watched his face I could tell by the expression of hope and eagerness in his eyes and on his face I could tell that he had in mind something exquisite and something beautiful that he was going to show me he could bring out of this lump of clay there was sort of a radiance about his face of anticipation and hope and every person that God puts his hand on there's a tremendous hope in the heart of God

that this individual this individual will emerge as somebody of beauty and worth and of noble youth as he began to handle the clay the next thing that impressed me was the fact that on his little rickety bench where he sat on either side of him he had a bowl of water and he never ever touched the clay that once he put it on the stone he never ever touched it except through the medium of the water his hands were never dry his hands were continually being dipped in this water and applied to the clay through the medium of the water and right away the word of God came to me very clearly about this when God deals with you and when he deals with me he deals with me through the medium of his word his hand is upon you his hand is upon me but it's only upon me through the word a lot of Christians

nowadays are looking for sort of almost extra sensory perception they're looking for sort of extra sensory excitement and experiences they're looking for visions and special voices and all this kind of thing you know what I have to tell you this morning and I'm telling it to you in great earnestness God molds you and God shapes you and God determines the direction in which you're moving by virtue of the word of God applied to your life and not in these extraneous ways that so many people are looking for it's through the word applied to my life it's through the word that God speaks to me it's through the word that God applies the molding influences to my life and this individual will not open the word of God will not examine the word of God will not study the word of God will not allow

himself to be exposed to the word of God you have literally deprived God of the ability to mold and shape your life except in a very emotional way which is not a lasting way this address continues on side two and to my delight as this dear old craftsman began to work on this goblet it took shape a most magnificent form and suddenly the wheels stopped and I wondered why and with great care he picked up a tiny, tiny straw from beside him and out of the side of the goblet he extricated a fine, fine particle of sand his hands, those knowing, delicate, tender hands of his had touched an obstruction, had come on a point of resistance and they were being thwarted in what they were trying to shape out of the clay and he removed this particle and he started the stone again and began to whirl

faster and faster and again it stopped and again he removed another particle of grit this hard granite he moved that from the clay and I noticed a worried look started to come over his face and he started a third time and the third time suddenly when the wheels stopped I could see what had actually happened this time very clearly a deep gouge had been gouged right in the side of the goblet completely ruining his work and his shoulders slumped and a sad appearance came over his face of absolute dismay and suddenly to my dismay he just crushed the whole lump down in another heap again and this verse came to me then, this verse from Jeremiah and the vessel that he the potter made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter I never understood that, I never understood that before what had

marred it? resistance resistance at this time in my life about the time I was sent on this assignment I was just at the turning point in my Christian life I as a child had given my life to Christ at about the age of ten as

best I knew how as a child but largely it was an intellectual ascent it was an emotional experience and my will had never been brought into harmony or into subjection to the will of God and for the next thirty years of my life I literally did what Philip Keller wanted to do and not what anybody else wanted me to do leave alone God and when I saw what happened to that goblet God spoke to me in tremendous impact he said Philip, this is exactly the difficulty I've had in your life for thirty years is this thing my hands have been upon you for good I have been endeavoring

to bring something of value something of merit out of your life and all I've run into is resistance at point after point after point now what God was saying to me I'm sure he's saying to most of you and you know it there are places in our lives there are points in our lives at which we will not do the thing God wants us to do there are given situations come into our experience where we simply dig in our heels and deliberately refuse to comply with the wishes of God and we can go into a church or we can go into any group of God's people and you can find men and women for whom God had tremendous aspirations for whom God had tremendous desires for whom God had enormous hope of bringing something of beauty something of great use a vessel unto honor out of this individual's life and it never

happened it never happened wasted years wasted lives wasted careers wasted people and yet with God you know the amazing thing is that he doesn't just cast us aside he doesn't just cast people aside and this dear old potter without making any comment either to the missionary or to myself he suddenly started the wheel whirling again and started all over with this mass of mud but this time out of it a totally different thing was emerging and I turned to the missionary and I said what's he making now because it didn't even resemble a goblet oh he said that's just a peasant's finger bowl that's just a peasant's finger bowl it will go into any little shack in the country the goblet would have gone to adorn a nobleman's house the goblet would have been used to handle and hold fine wine that

would be poured out to other people this is just a finger bowl in which people dabble their hands when they come to visit you rinse their fingers after eating their rice and their mutton and again God really spoke to me God seems to speak to me more clearly through things like this than through any sermon and what he said to me was simply this he said tell her what are you going to be what are you going to be are you going to be a goblet that God can really use to hold the wine of his life or are you going to just be a finger bowl that people fiddle around with in their lives and dabble their fingers in which is it going to be so he finished the finger bowl very quickly it didn't matter if it was a bit rough it didn't matter if it was a bit scored he simply finished it off very quickly

then he reached over and he picked up a fine, fine thread off a nail hanging beside him this thread was just about as fine as a human hair one of the finest threads I've ever seen and with the wheel whirling very quickly he dipped the thread in water again and soaked it in water and he stretched it very tightly between his two hands and extending it out like this he simply drew the thread through the clay and just cut the piece of pottery right off from its base I'd never seen that done either I often wondered how they did that again the water of the word on this thread was used to separate the piece of china from the old life from the old clay and God is going to use his word in your life and he's going to use his word in my life if we will allow him to to separate me from my old way of

living to separate me from my old lifestyle that's why Paul wrote to Timothy in that passage I read to you and he said you know a man has to be separated a man or a woman has to be cut off from the old life you don't live the old lifestyle and just tack Christianity onto it like you tack shingles on the side of the house and give it a facelift that isn't the way God works it's a complete detachment from the old way of life and

you're set aside you're separated set aside for service of some kind so he picked up this little finger bowl and he took it I was amazed how gently and tenderly this man handled everything he took it so tenderly and so gently and he took it over and he put it on the shelf where other raw pieces of pottery stood and he turned to me and through the missionary he said

they have to sit there for a long time he said they sit there a long time curing curing curing sometimes in my life I have wondered why God set me on the shelf I'm a man of action I like to see things happening I like to see things moving I like the sense that there's some progress being made in my life doesn't matter which direction it is as long as it's moving ahead and yet there have been periods in which God has set me on the shelf so to speak not casting me aside don't misunderstand me but setting me aside quiet times still times in which you seem to be out of the action of things out of you seem to be sort of out of the midst of great movement you know these can be the most valuable times too I shall never forget one period especially when I was down in the South Pacific how that I

would walk up and down the beaches imploring God to somehow change my life move me someplace where I'd be of some use to somebody and the only reply I got from God is you have to get to know me first you have to get to know me first I have to get to know you there has to be a time of ripening there has to be a time of maturing there has to be a time when we're absolutely alone with God a time when we can really really sense God's imprint and God's impact being made upon our lives in the stillness and the quietness without a tremendous lot of excitement and turmoil going on this is one of the reasons I like to go away for a few months in the year it's very important to me tremendously important and then he said to me he said but that isn't where the work is finished and he pointed to his

array of wares that were for sale up on the on the shelves and I couldn't get over how beautiful they were exquisite, exquisite work I've seldom seen pottery in this country to compare with it he said do you see all this beautiful work? he says that's the product of a lifetime he says I've been a lifetime in this work he said that's the product of a lifetime he says my name's at stake in that pottery my reputation is at stake in that pottery he said I'm known as the finest potter in the northwest and there is evidence of it but he says it has to all go through the fire it all has to go through the fire and he took me over then into another part of his little shop where you look through a funny little hole and there he had a quartz window a very crude quartz window and as you peered

through this quartz window you could see terrific flames back in his retort tremendous flames burning in there with the pieces in there he said they don't all come through that he said some of them chip and some crack and some break with the heat but he said they all have to go through it that's why I read that passage to you from Isaiah chapter 48 and verse 10 where God when speaking of his people said look I'm trying you in the fires of affliction because my name is at stake in you a lot of God's people wonder why God puts them into tough situations we wonder why he exposes for example to ill health or bereavement or sorrow or disasters in the family or financial reverses or friends who we thought were friends turning false or you name it a lot of us think it's in order to prove our

faith in God you know what it's really for it's to prove his faithfulness to me and there's a world of difference in these two things it's to prove that he can be faithful to me no matter how tough the going is when I discovered this in my Christian life it began to make all the difference in the world to me how I lived as a person I simply say this that the men and women who really are going to make an impact on your life and the ones who've made a great impact on my life are almost invariably men and women who've been through tough things men and women who've been through real difficulty men and women who've been

through the fire of adversity through the fires of affliction and have proved that God is faithful to them they are the fine people they are the beautiful people they are the

noble people they are the people in whom the life of God in Christ becomes very real and when their lives touch your lives something of the spirit of God touches you and touches me the story is told of a young woman with a marvelous voice who was asked to sing and in the audience were a number of very mature people whose whole lives had been given to singing and opera and things of that kind and after the performance was over two of them were talking and the one turned to the other and said what do you think of this young woman singing? and the other said it's exquisite but it's lacking something and she said this girl is still so young she has not suffered and her voice will not be enriched and her voice will not have attained its full beauty and its full glory until she has suffered and

in a sense God's reason for allowing some of us to go through difficult things and through tough situations is in order that we might become truly vessels unto honor truly beautiful people of his workmanship able to contain his life able to pour this life out for others in order that others being touched by the life of God that moves through us the wine of God's spirit the life of God himself through you, through me they will be refreshed they will be restored these are some of the lessons which I learned that day in the potter's shop and they've never left me this is how God chooses to mold and shape men and women I trust something of value has come out of it for you this morning if you enjoyed listening to this tape produced by the author of A Shepherd Looks at Psalms 23 then you'll

also enjoy his other single cassette entitled Lessons from a Sheepdog and for discussion of how to nourish the spiritual fruits in a Christian's life you'll want to hear the eight cassette study program A Gardener Looks at the Fruits of the Spirit for information about these tapes by Phillip Keller ask your local Christian bookstore or write to Word Incorporated Waco, Texas 76796

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