

Help Wanted: A Potter

by Warren Wiersbe

God is the Potter, and we are the clay, and he has a plan for us that we must submit to and trust in.

Duration: 53:28

Scripture: Genesis 12:10-20, Genesis 35:1, Jeremiah 18:1-10, Jeremiah 19:1, Jeremiah 19:10, Jonah 3, Matthew 26:69-75

Topics: "Gods Sovereignty", "Divine Forgiveness"

Description

In this sermon, the preacher discusses the story of Jacob and his encounter with God at Bethel. Jacob had run away from his family and was sleeping with a stone as a pillow when he had a vision of a ladder with angels going up and down. This vision revealed to Jacob that behind all of life is a personal God who watches over him. The preacher emphasizes that God is a person with power and control over history, and that even when faced with challenges or mistakes, God is a forgiving God who gives us another chance. The sermon concludes with the preacher encouraging listeners to trust in God's control over their lives and not to worry or despair.

Transcript

Jeremiah chapter 18, verses 1 through 10, are very familiar verses talking about the potter and the clay. One of our familiar hymns of dedication, Have Thine Own Way Lord, is based on this passage. Jeremiah chapter 18, 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.

Then I went down to the potter's house, and behold he wrought a work on the wheels. Some manuscripts read, and behold he wrought his 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, cannot I do with you as this potter, saith the Lord? Behold, as the clay is in the potter's hands, so are ye in mine hand, O house of Israel. At what instant I shall speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to pluck up and to pull down and to destroy it, if that nation against whom I have pronounced turn from their evil, I will repent of the evil that I thought to do unto them. And at what instant I shall speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to build and to plant it, if it do evil in my sight that it obey not my voice, then I will repent of the good with which I said I would benefit them.

In chapter 19, God gave to Jeremiah a second instruction. He said in verse 1, Go and get a potter's earthen vessel, or flask, and take of the ancients of the people and of the ancients of the priests, and go forth unto the valley of the son of Hinnom. And he is to preach them a sermon.

And then he is to break the flask in verse 10, after he preaches the sermon about judgment. Then shalt thou break the bottle or the flask in the sight of the men that go with thee, and shalt say unto them, Thus saith the Lord of hosts, Even so will I break this people and this city, as one breaketh a potter's vessel that cannot be made whole again. Every person who walks the streets of Chicago has some philosophy of life.

Now, he wouldn't call it that. If you were to walk down Michigan Avenue and stop some person and say, Do you have a philosophy of life? Oh yeah, but I don't call it that. I have certain values that I live for.

I have certain principles that I live by, certain goals that I'm trying to reach. But everybody has some kind of philosophy of life. There is some pattern of thinking that governs what you do.

Otherwise, you are a totally disorganized person. You're a victim of your own feelings and your own surroundings. However you make your decisions, however you direct your life, it's being guided by some philosophy, some outlook on life.

Now, if you do have a philosophy of life, and everybody does, it has to include a number of factors. If you're going to have a complete philosophy of life, you've got to be able to have some thought as to what God is, if there is a God, and what man is, and what life is, and what success is. If every one of us could just sit down and examine our hearts and say, Now, what is God to me? Is he some far away dictator trying to ruin my life? What is God? What is man? What is life? What's life all about? And what is success? What is failure? Now, these factors are important factors because if we answer them correctly, we'll live the right kind of a life.

If we answer them incorrectly, something is going to go wrong with our lives radically. When I read Jeremiah chapter 18 verses 1 through 10, I see, this is what God says to me, I see here one of the most satisfying, one of the most encouraging philosophies of life a person can have. If we understand what Jeremiah understood in this circumstance, you know what it'll do for us? It'll make us better understand what God is like, and what we are, and what life is all about, and we'll better be able to measure our successes and deal with our failures.

Now, you can see what the factors are in all of this. He talks about a potter. He talks about clay.

He talks about a vessel. He talks about a wheel. There's one other factor that he doesn't mention here, but it's there, a furnace.

Because after the potter had finished making the vessel, he gave it a special coating of a special fluid, then put it into the furnace and watched the vessel change color. Then he'd take it out, and he'd have a completed vessel. So here are the factors that are involved in Jeremiah's experience.

And out of these factors, we want to build a workable philosophy of life, one that pleases God, one that is true to the Bible, one that is satisfying to our hearts, one that really works. I confess to you that sometimes I pull a book of philosophy off of the shelf and I read it. Some years ago, I purchased a huge set called the Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

I thought that'd be a big help to me in my ministry. And I read some of these articles, and I remember what Harry Rimmer said many years ago at Winona Lake, a philosopher is a blind man in a dark room looking for a black cat that isn't there. Now, I am not against Christian philosophy.

If when you're building your philosophy, my friend, you bring in the Bible and Jesus Christ and God, I'm right with you. When I read so many of these writers and they leave out God and nothing makes sense when you leave God out. So let's do this tonight.

Let's take these factors. Now we have a potter and we have clay and we have a wheel. We have a vessel that was marred and then made again.

We have a furnace. Let's take these factors and look at them from three different vantage points. We want to look at them separately.

Let's take each of these separately. Then we want to look at them collectively. Put them together.

You see, knowledge means taking things apart. Wisdom means putting them back together. There are a lot of people who can take everything apart.

They can't put anything back together again. So we're going to look at them individually. Then secondly, we're going to look at them collectively.

Then thirdly, we're going to look at them personally. What do they mean to us personally? And I trust that we'll go away from this service tonight better able to face life, better able to carry those burdens, better able to deal with disappointments, better able to handle failure, and most of all better able to glorify God. First the factors separately.

Let's start with the potter. Arise and go down to the potter's house. God is the potter.

He tells us that. Verse 6, cannot I do with you as this potter? Now granted, the message here is to the nation. He's talking about nations and kingdoms, but oh, it applies to us as individuals.

God is the potter. You know what this means? This means that behind everything in this universe is a person. We live in a personal universe.

We are not living in a universe that is merely made up of the strange and accidental conjunction of atoms. We are living in a universe that has behind it a person. God is a person.

This world is not in the hands of an impersonal force. This world is not in the hands of impersonal fate. Everything in this world is in the hands of a person, a personal God who compares himself to a potter.

You know, Jacob found that out. I love to read the life of Jacob because he tells me about the God of Jacob. Jacob ran away from home trying to escape his problems, and you've learned and I've learned you can't run away from your problems.

They always catch up with you. Jacob came to Bethel and he got himself a stone and he made his stone into a pillow. That's a pretty hard pillow, but he had a hard bed to lie on.

He'd made a mess. And while he was sleeping that night, he has a vision and he discovers something very interesting. He ran away from mother and dad and ran away from his brother.

He couldn't run away from God. And there was this ladder. The angels were going up and the other angels were coming down.

He was watching the changing of the guard. I've watched the changing of the guard at Buckingham Palace and I've watched the changing of the guard at Arlington, but I would like to have been there that night and watched the changing of the guard at Bethel. You know what Jacob discovered? That behind all of life is a personal God who has his angels watching over him.

God is a person. He's the potter. Now God is a person with power.

He's not an absentee landlord who wound everything up and said, run down. Nor is he some sort of a foreman who gives orders to others. He is a God who is close to us, a God with power and his hands touch our lives.

Now sometimes he uses the hands of teachers, the hands of parents, the hands of preachers, the hands of missionaries. Sometimes God uses the hands of our enemies, but God's hand is behind every hand and God has the power to make us the way he wants us to be, except for one thing. In his sovereignty he has decreed freedom.

We'll be talking about the clay, but let me drop it into your mind right now. You and I are made of clay. God took the clay and he breathed into the clay the breath of life and he made the first man and when a body decomposes it goes back to dust.

We're made of clay, but we're different from clay in this regard. We can resist. We have a will.

Do you know what my friends? It takes a sovereign God to be able to work with freedom. If God were not sovereign he could never work with freedom. If God made us like robots where he programs us, feeds all the data in, pushes the right button and we operate like little mechanical men, if God made us like that he wouldn't need any sovereignty.

But because God made us with the power of choice he's not afraid because he's sovereign and our freedom operates within the sphere of his wonderful sovereignty. Never be afraid of the sovereignty of God. That's what he learned Jeremiah did at the potter's house, that God is the potter, he's personal, he has power, he has a plan, he's not just working helter-skelter the way children sometimes do in our daycare center.

He doesn't start one thing and doesn't finish something else. He takes the clay. If you'd have watched the potter with Jeremiah you would have seen what he did.

He'd go out to the clay field and he would scoop up the clay that he needed then he'd wash the clay, he'd clean out the impurities and he'd weather the clay, he'd allow it to set, then he would work it over so that it was smooth. He would get the clay into the very best possible texture because he could see in his mind the vessel that he wants to make. No matter what you're going through remember this, God knows what he's doing.

I can still remember in the early days of my Christian life a radio program from the Moody Bible Institute that I wouldn't have missed for anything. Every Saturday morning, I'm sure it was on on Saturday morning, that's my recollection, it was Bob Parsons and the Quiet Hour. Wasn't that a Saturday morning program? I believe it was.

And Mr. Parsons would come on and he would always start the program with, God is still on the throne and he will remember his own. And that used to encourage me to know that no matter what the headlines may say, what kind of a mess the state department has made, God is still on the throne and he knows what he's doing. And more than that, God is a person.

God is a person with power. He is a person using that power to effect a plan and he is a person who is working patiently. Now that always rebukes me because I have a tendency to be impatient.

I want it done now. Lord make me patient and do it right now. I have a tendency to want to see things happen right now.

But oh God is so patient and God works with the clay because we are his workmanship, that Greek word poema, manufactured product. We are God's manufactured product created in Christ Jesus. God is the potter.

Now man is the clay. This infuriates some people because clay is weak. Throughout the Bible, clay is a symbol of weakness and man is weak.

And man had better admit that he is weak. God has made us out of clay and clay cannot mold itself. The marvelous thing about clay is this.

Clay has tremendous potential. You know, if God compares us to many different things in the Bible, he compares us to members of the body and stones in a temple and the sheep and priests and kings and sacrifices. In Malachi he compares us to jewels.

In that day when I make up my jewels. We have a little children's song in the hymn book. When he cometh, when he cometh to make up his jewels.

All his jewels, precious jewels, his loved and his own. We are one of God's jewels. But there is only so much you can do with a jewel.

You polish it and you shape it and you cut it and you put it in a ring or a pendant or a necklace or a pin. There is only so much you can do with a jewel. With clay, the tremendous potential that is there.

I suppose one of the biggest sins we Christians commit is the sin of not letting God realize in our lives the full potential. You know, we underrate ourselves. Many times when I'm counseling with people, I discover that they have a very low self-image.

They say, oh, I'm not worth anything. I can't do anything. I see this person and I see that person.

I'm not like them. And in underrating themselves, they are undercutting themselves. They're robbing themselves of all that God can do in their life.

Clay has tremendous potential. Potential to do what? Potential to make a vessel. Did you know, my friends, that you and I are vessels? That's a marvelous thing to be.

You know, vessels don't manufacture anything unless you're reading the Arabian Nights or some fairy tale. Vessels don't manufacture anything. Vessels just simply contain and share, contain and share.

And God has made us to be vessels. I thank God that week after week, I don't have to manufacture anything. I get into pastor's conferences and I appreciate the privilege.

And I sometimes chat with pastors about this business of preaching and ministering. And sometimes they come up afterward and they say, oh, brother, where's the... It's just killing me week after week to find something to say. I say, my dear brother, quit trying to find something to say.

Just be an available vessel and your problem is going to be to find enough time to say all you want to say and getting somebody who'll sit long enough to listen to you. We're vessels. The clay has tremendous potential.

Now, a vessel is valuable for two reasons. Number one, the person who made it. I'm not an antique collector.

I had an interesting experience. My wife and I were going through a large shopping center in St. Petersburg, Florida. And I was looking for the bookstores and I'd forgotten what she was looking for.

And they were having an antique exhibit in the mall of this shopping, this huge shopping center. And now, as many of you know, St. Petersburg is a great place for retirement. There are a number of elderly people down there.

And I had to laugh out loud. If you'd have been with me, you'd have been embarrassed. But I laughed out loud as I walked down the mall, sitting on a bench next to this antique exhibit were about a half a dozen very tired looking old people.

And right next to them was a sign that said antiques for sale. I would have moved. A vessel is good because of the one who made it.

And I watched people at this antique sale and they would pick up a vessel and they'd turn around and see who made it. Does this belong to so and so? Well, you've seen this in museums. Here's a piece of pottery.

Oh, but this is valuable because it came from the Ming dynasty. This is valuable. Now, you know, we as vessels are valuable because of the one who made it.

God made it. And God is still making us. Secondly, a vessel is valuable because of what it contains.

If I need medicine, I don't care what you hand it to me in. I'll take it. All that's necessary is that that vessel be clean, empty and yielded.

That's all that's necessary. God isn't saying to you you've got to be a certain kind of beauty, a certain stature, a certain education. It's good to have all you can get.

All God says to you is, look, I am making you. You're a vessel. The thing that's important is that you be clean and empty and available so I can fill you with something and I'll fill you.

And you just go on out and share this with others. We are the clay. Now, the wheel.

That's the next factor. Life is the wheel. The potter takes the clay.

I've watched them do this. We detoured down a bumpy, dusky road in Kentucky one day because we saw a sign that said pottery. I'd never watched potters at work.

And we saw the man just take a great, big fistful of clay and whop it right on those wheels. They have two wheels. They have a lower wheel and an upper wheel connected.

And in Jesus' day and back in Old Testament days and still in many places, the lower wheel was operated by the feet of the potter. Today they have motor driven and power driven wheels. And then he, it was beautiful how he did it.

I don't know how he did it, but he did it. Here was this big pile of ugly clay. Looked like somebody's mistake sitting there.

And you know how they do it? They get their hands, they get their fingers on either side. They come in like this and get their thumbs down the middle and just pull it right up. You ever see them do it? They just reached up and they pull it up as though there was a vessel hiding in there and they found it.

It's a beautiful thing. Now you can't do anything with the vessel without the wheel. That wheel represents life.

Life is the wheel and that wheel is controlled by God. And there's nothing accidental about the way the wheel goes, whether it goes fast or slow, starts or stops. It's all in the hands of the potter.

You see, the turning of that wheel gave opportunity for that clay to become something. I hear people say, well, time will take care of it. I've got bad news for you.

Time doesn't take care of anything. Time takes care of nothing. Time is neutral.

If I were to fall down these stairs and break my arm and they take me over to Augustana Hospital and the doctor looks at it and says, well, that's okay. Time will take care of it. Sure, time might end up like this.

But if he says, now, reverend, doctors always call preachers reverend. They say, now, reverend, we're going to put a cast on that arm for you, and within six weeks, is that enough time, Connie? Six weeks? Within six weeks, time and that cast and the way God has made you will heal that arm. Time doesn't do anything.

You do something with time. And this wheel is going around, and lots of clay misses the opportunity. So the wheel represents life.

Now, sin is pictured by the marring of the clay. Here he is, he reaches down and he begins to pull up the vessel, and there's something in the clay that resists. There's some imperfection.

There's some weakness. And the vessel is marred in the hands of the potter. The potter didn't mar it.

While he's in the process of making us, something happens. Do you know what sin really is? It's failure to be what God wants us to be. Missing the mark.

Failure in the hands of the potter. You see, you and I can rebel if we want to. The clay ordinarily can't do that, but you and I can.

Success in life simply means fulfilling the will of God. Finding what it is God wants to make you into, what God wants to use you for, and then do it. Not measure your vessel by somebody else.

Just be what God wants you to be and do what God wants you to do. That is success. To be a great success in the eyes of the world and to be a failure in the eyes and hands of God is a tragedy.

And so life is the wheel and sin means being marred. And you know what forgiveness is? Being made again. Verse 4 can be read like this.

The Hebrew verb there can be translated, and whenever the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hands of the potter, then he made it again. Now every vessel wasn't marred. Many of the vessels came out fine, they were given the liquid treatment, they were put into the furnace, they became beautiful vessels for the master's use.

But whenever a vessel was marred, patiently the potter said, let me fix that. The thing that Jeremiah is teaching us is this, we are not the victims of circumstances, we aren't even the victims of our own nature. If I look at the wheel of life, I could be very discouraged.

If I look at myself, I could be very discouraged. So Jeremiah says, hey look at the potter. The potter is the one who's important.

And if you fail, and we all do, if at some point in life there was a resistance and now we look back and say, oh I'm sorry about that. Jeremiah says don't give up. When the vessel was marred in the hands of the potter, the potter didn't do what I would have done.

I would have picked the whole thing up and thrown it away. But not God. Isn't it great that you and I have good news to share with people? There's so much bad news today.

You pick up the morning newspaper, you can't find much good news. You punch on the TV, you don't find much good news. You even hate to hear the phone ring anymore, don't you? There's just not a great deal of good news.

I'm so happy that God called me to preach good news that nobody has to stay the way he is. No home has to stay the way it is. No student has to stay the way he is.

No husband, no wife, no son, no daughter, no church. That he can make it again. Abraham fouled things up in Egypt and God made him again.

Jacob spent 20 years getting into trouble and God made him again. He said, go on back to Bethel. I'm going to make you all over again.

God used Jacob. David not only marred his vessel, he defiled his vessel and God made him again. And Peter did the same thing and God made him again.

And the word of the Lord came a second time to Jonah and God made him again and God will make you again. The victorious Christian life is a series of new beginnings. So much for the factors separately.

God is the potter and man is the clay and life is the wheel and sin means being marred and forgiveness means being made again. Now the factors collectively. Let's put them together.

The key to all of this is the potter. The wheel means nothing without the potter. The clay means nothing without the potter.

The key to all of this, the thing that ties everything together is the potter. That's why when people leave God out of their lives, nothing works the way it ought to work. Let's take this wheel.

The wheel represents life, circumstances, history. We talk about the wheel of life turning, don't we? Now, if you look at that wheel turning, but you don't see the potter, you're in trouble. That means that human history is just fate.

Here's the wheel going round and round. I'd get awfully pessimistic if I watch this wheel going around, but I don't see the potter who's turning the wheel. I'll say, what's running this thing? Is there anything in control of history? I enjoy reading history.

I enjoy reading what historians say about history, not what happened, but why it happened. And you sit down with a half a dozen books on the meaning of history, and you'll find a half a dozen different theories. Will Durant, who has written that huge collection on the story of civilization, marvelous, marvelous set of books, he and his wife sat down to write a little thin book, after writing all these tens of thousands of pages, a little thin book on the lessons of history.

An interesting book, you've got to read it. The Lessons of History. They see the wheel, and they have one explanation for it.

And then I go down to the library, and here is this massive thing by Toynbee, A Study of History, a set of books so profound there may not be 25 people in the country who have read it and digested it and can explain it. He has another view of history. And you pick up different historians and have them watch the wheel, and they clock the wheel, and they draw the wheel, and they analyze the wheel.

But if you leave the potter out, it doesn't make sense. That's why we who are Christians, who know that there's a personal God in control of this wheel, we aren't pessimistic. I'm not pessimistic about history.

I'm not pessimistic about what's going to happen in the affairs of men. You know why? The wheel is being run by the potter, and he knows what he's doing. Dr. Arthur T. Pearson was a great and godly man.

I think he preached here on occasion at the Moody Church. A great friend of D.L. Moody, a great missionary leader, a tremendous Bible teacher. If you ever see the books by A.T. Pearson, you get them and read them because they are worth reading.

And A.T. Pearson had a little slogan that he often used. He would say, history, history is his story. That encourages me.

No matter what may happen to the stock market or the dollar over in Germany, no matter what may happen with diplomats or ambassadors or wars or rumors of wars, history is his story. I'm not pessimistic. I'm not pessimistic about my life.

He's arranging the wheel of my life. Someday the wheel may stop. It's in his hands.

Some days the wheel goes faster. Some days it slows down. I'm not going to worry.

It's in his hands. What do these poor people do who don't have a potter who controls the wheel of life? I know what they do. They worry.

They give up in despair. They turn to needles and pills and bottles, trying to escape something they cannot escape. Now, the secret of the clay is the potter.

If you just looked at the clay without the potter, you'd give up. You'd just stand in front of the mirror and say, well, there you are, you big hunk of clay. And that hunk is bigger than it ought to be.

There you are. If I looked at myself apart from God, I would quit. I'd give up.

Paul was the same way. Paul said, I know. Make a list someday of all the things Paul knew.

Go through his letters and find out when he uses the word know, K-N-O-W. I know that in me, that is in my flesh dwells no good thing. Paul analyzed all the clay that he was made up and said, you know what? Zero.

Zero. There's nothing good about us. The only human being who ever walked this earth whose clay was priceless was Jesus Christ.

Perfect. And if I sat and looked at myself long enough, I'd be pessimistic. I'd say, well, there's no hope for you.

Your clay is weak. Your clay is dirty. Your clay may have potential, but you can't make it yourself.

The clay cannot mold itself. The world talks about a self-made man. Foolish.

For a person really to be a self-made man, he'd have to live in isolation. And that's impossible. The instant he's born, he'd have to be isolated from everybody and he'd die.

Nobody's a self-made man. But when you take the potter and add that to the clay, then you've got something. The wheel by itself, pessimistic.

No hope. Add the potter. Oh, there's control.

The clay by itself, nothing. Waste. Add the potter.

You've got something. That's why I'm glad that the hands of the potter are on our lives. When you got saved, that clay came into the hands of the potter and he began to mold you.

And so when you put the whole thing together, it starts to make sense. It gives you a philosophy of life that's beautiful. We aren't afraid of life because the potter controls the wheel.

We aren't afraid of this universe because behind it is a loving potter. We aren't afraid of being clay because there's tremendous potential there and he knows what he's doing. And so when you put the clay on the wheel and the potter runs everything, you have a life that may not be easy.

And God never promised us an easy life, but you have a life that is fulfilling a purpose. A life that is inescapably in the hands of the potter. He's making a product and he's going to finish what he makes.

I have told you on more than one occasion about the dear lady who suffered so much in her sick bed and one day complained to her pastor saying, why has God made me like this? And very wisely the pastor responded, he has not made you, he is making you. Now we quickly look at these factors personally. We've been talking now about a philosophy of life.

What is God? What is history? What is man? What is sin? What is success? We've seen how the key to the whole situation is the Take the potter out, the wheel is nothing. Take the potter out, the clay is nothing. Take the potter out, the marred vessel is hopeless.

But you put the potter in there, the wheel makes sin. The clay has potential and even the marred vessel can be made again because our potter is a forgiving God who gives us another chance and another chance and another chance. Now let's take all of this personally.

What responsibilities do we have? Would you be shocked if I told you your first responsibility is really to believe that there is a potter in control? That's where it starts. In order for God to do anything in our lives, we have to be able to say, all right, I believe that behind this universe there is a person. In my life there is a person.

I have received Jesus as my savior. God is not a far away God. God's hands are on my life.

I will begin right now by saying he is the potter. That's first step. I'm not the potter.

The people in my life are not the potter, although the potter can use them. He's the potter. You know what that does for you? It just immediately relieves you of one of the greatest responsibilities a lot of people try to carry, namely making themselves after their own image.

That's an awful way to live. To set up some kind of standard for yourself and then by your own strength try to lift yourself up to it and life becomes so weary, so tiresome. We begin by saying, oh God, you're the potter.

I can't mold myself. You're the potter. That's first responsibility.

Second responsibility, you've got to admit that you're the clay. I'm the clay. A lot of people don't want to admit they're clay.

They think they're Superman, the man of steel. Friend, God didn't make you out of steel or platinum or diamond. He made you out of clay.

It's a wonderful day of liberation when a Christian comes to the point where he says, you know, I'm clay. That means you accept your weaknesses. They're a part of life.

We have this treasure in what kind of vessel? Earthen vessels that the excellency of the power may be of God and not of us. Oh, some of you dear saints think you are fine china. You're not.

Some of the saints who think they are such great expensive vessels are really only cracked pots. We're clay. You know, it's a beautiful thing when a person accepts his weaknesses.

I don't mean sins. We never accept our sins. Weaknesses.

The human infirmities of the flesh. But it also means when you say I'm clay, you're saying I've got tremendous potential. Every once in a while, the Lord brings into my life a person who, at a certain time, just gives me an extra 220 jolt of encouragement.

You see, I spent a lot of my life encouraging other people. And every once in a while, God looks at me and says, I think you need a little extra jolt. And this happened to me yesterday.

I was speaking to a group of pastors. And after the meeting, a young man came up to me and he said, I heard you preach at Winona Lake, Indiana in 1959. I said, man, that's almost 20 years ago.

Of course, I started preaching very young, you see. He said, I want you to know that at the close of that service, when you gave the invitation, I came forward and got saved. And today I'm in the ministry.

Now, I don't remember that event. He didn't tell me until yesterday. But I've preached many times at youth meetings, and I've seen gangly kids with acne walking the aisles.

And I thought to myself, well, what is this with all the potential that's there? And he says, Pastor, I want you to know that today I am the minister of education in a church here, and God's using me to win souls. Potential. Now, if you look at yourself without the potter, first you got the potter.

If you look at yourself without the potter, you'll get discouraged. But oh, when you start with the potter, you're the potter. I'm the clay.

I'll accept my weaknesses. I'll accept my humanity. I'll accept my humanness.

But I'm also going to accept the fact that in my life is tremendous potential. Friend, don't you sell yourself short. Don't you ever sell yourself short.

God has a tremendous thing he wants to do in your life, and all of the forces of hell can't keep him from doing it if you're in the potter's hands. So one, we accept God as the hand of the potter because the clay wouldn't yield. We yield to God.

We don't fight life. As the wheel is spinning, we don't holler out, stop the wheel. I want to get off.

He won't do it. We don't tell him how fast to run the wheel or how slow. We don't tell him how much pressure to put on.

We don't even tell him whose hands he can use to mold us. In my own life, God has used some very strange hands to mold me. Some of the people I thought were my enemies turned out to do the greatest thing for the molding of my life.

Some of the big disappointments in life, when by the stroke of a hand, someone changed something in my life that I had depended on. At the time, I thought this was the end, but it wasn't. It was the beginning.

I suppose somebody here tonight says, you know, there are people in my life who can determine my destiny. No, they can't. I mean, they can sign a paper.

They can make a... No, they can't. No, it's in God's hands if you're yielded. Now, if you're fighting, God will use all kinds of hands to bring you to the place of surrender.

But if we're yielded to him, I don't care who puts his hands on your clay. God's hand is on his hand. And God can't... Well, God will not let him do a thing to you apart from his plan.

Moses. Men tried to do all kinds of things to him. God was there.

Joseph. Joseph's own brethren. And by the way, sometimes you have your hardest problem with your brethren.

Joseph's own brethren laid hands on him, and they thought they were doing evil, but God worked it out for good. Now, hear me, my friend. Admit that God's the potter.

Admit that you are the clay. Then yield to God and let him do what he wants to do. Let him use whatever hands he wants to use for it.

Be a vessel to serve others. The vessel doesn't serve itself. The vessel serves others.

I read some time ago about a Christian nurse. Now, it could just as well have been a Christian sales lady or a Christian gasoline pump operator, but it happened to be a nurse who said to her pastor, all day long people jostle me. There's always somebody pushing me and demanding this and demanding that.

I'm tired of it. Now, you've been through that. And her pastor wisely said to her, well, you and I are vessels.

God has filled us with his blessing that we might spill over on others. And sometimes if the blessing is a little low, we've got to be shook up a little bit to get it out. That's good theology.

My cup runneth over. You see, God wants us to be vessels unto honor. Clean, empty, available.

He fills us. We spill out on others. He fills us.

We spill out on others. That's a wonderful way to live. Just to be a vessel unto honor, meet for the master's use.

Admit that God is the potter. Accept the fact that you're clay with all of its problems and all of its potential. Yield to God and let him do what he wants to using whatever hands he wants to use and be a vessel that serves others.

And you know what will happen? All the pieces will fall into place. The potter will become very precious to you. And you'll become more and more sensitive to every touch of his hand.

When the vessel and the potter are very close to each other, the potter doesn't have to use a hammer, a blowtorch. Just the gentle touch of the potter's hand. And as you grow in the Lord, you can sense those little delicate touches of God that are molding in your life.

And then God puts you through the furnace. If the vessel could cry out, it would say, no, no. One of our missionaries told me about an experience she had in a Latin country where she'd gone to the marketplace and bought a vessel that she wanted to use for flowers.

She took it home, beautiful thing, put it on the table, filled it full of water, put the flowers in it, and within a few hours it had completely fallen apart. And she found out why. The vessel had been molded.

The vessel had been painted. The vessel had not gone through the furnace. Now, the vessel doesn't enjoy going through the furnace.

They tell me that if you could watch the vessel in the furnace, you would see it completely changing texture and color. It almost becomes a new kind of material. We don't enjoy the furnace, but it's good for us.

And you know, the same potter who molded us keeps his hands on the thermostat, and he knows just how much we can take, and he knows just how much we need. And the furnace does two things for the vessel.

Number one, it makes it strong.

So the water doesn't go seeping out. Number two, it makes it beautiful. It brings out the color.

The right kind of a potter with the right kind of skill can put the right kind of materials together so that when that heat goes to work, it brings out beauty that is not seen outside the furnace. And so, my friend, we don't have to be afraid. We see the whole picture.

What is our philosophy of life? I'm just a hunk of clay. Problems? Yes, potential. What is God? He's the potter.

What is life? It's a wheel in the hands of the potter. What is God doing? He's molding a vessel, a vessel that can be used for His glory to bring the water of life to other people. I make mistakes, but I don't quit.

The vessel that He made was marred, but He made it again. He made it again. And so we don't quit.

We don't give up. We don't say, Oh, Lord, I'm not good enough material. He knows we aren't good enough material.

That's grace. However, just a word of warning. In the next chapter, Jeremiah came out not with a piece of clay, but a finished vessel, a vessel that would not obey.

And he smashed that vessel. You know what he's saying to us? There is such a thing as sovereign grace. God in His sovereign grace makes the vessel.

There's also such a thing as sovereign judgment. God in His sovereignty can break the vessel. The Jewish people had gone too far.

They resisted. They resisted. They resisted.

They disobeyed. The vessel was defiled. And God said, There's nothing I can do but break it.

That's what happened to Samson. You and I must be very, very careful not to tempt the sovereign grace of God. One final suggestion to you.

Did you ever meditate upon the fact that Judas committed suicide in a potter's field, a broken vessel? He resisted the will of God, went out and hanged himself. Apparently the rope broke and he fell down, hit some sharp pottery, was disemboweled. Ugly scene.

Here was a piece of clay that had every opportunity. Watched Jesus perform miracles. Saw Jesus heal people.

Listened to Jesus teach. Listened to Him pray. Was even the treasurer of the group.

Here was a piece of clay with tremendous potential and with tremendous opportunity and ended up a broken vessel by resisting the grace of God. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter. So he made it again.

Another vessel that seemed good to the potter to make. Gracious Father, grant to us that encouragement that we need now. If we looked only at ourselves, we'd be very discouraged because our material is not too good.

If we looked only at life with its circumstances, some of which are so hard to understand, we'd be very discouraged. If we looked at the furnace, we'd be discouraged. But thank you, Father, we can see the potter and put all of it together and it makes sense.

Thank you for this. And now, Lord, we're about to once again surrender ourselves to you. We're going to ask you to have your way in our lives.

Where we are resisting, forgive us. Help us to yield. Where we are dirty, forgive us.

Cleanse us. Where we are empty, fill us. And may we be the right kind of chosen vessels to bring your blessing to other people in the days to come.

For Jesus' sake, Amen.

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