

Clay in God's Hands

<i>Text</i>	Jeremiah 18:1-12
<i>Readings</i>	Jeremiah 19, Romans 9:1-24
<i>Theme</i>	God emphasises his sovereignty over his people with the picture of the potter and clay and calls them to repentance and obedience.
<i>Purpose</i>	To explain God's sovereignty over all people and to highlight our responsibility.

When Christians go through the Bible together in preaching and in Bible Studies and in catechism classes there are some issues and discussions that seem to come up regularly. Some doctrines reappear time and again.

One of these is the relationship between God's sovereignty and human responsibility. This comes up when we talk about evangelism, or about God's election, or about his providence in our lives or about his rule over world events.

The connection between God's sovereignty and human responsibility is a paradox – that is, there is an apparent contradiction between these two truths. We ask ourselves: how can God be in complete control over all everything that happens, and at the same time hold us fully responsible for all that goes on in our lives? How do these two truths fit together? They don't quite make sense to us; we can't reconcile them; we can't put them together in our human minds; we can't work these things out with our limited human understanding.

Yet both of these truths are taught in the Bible and they do make sense in the mind of God.

They seem contradictory to *us*, but not so to *God*. In the mind and will of God these two truths are in perfect harmony.

Both are both taught here in these chapters in Jeremiah.

On the one hand they teach that God is absolutely sovereign over our lives – as much as a potter is over a lump of clay.

And on the other hand they teach that we are responsible for all our actions and for all our choices and all of our sins.

The Lord communicated these truths to the people of Israel in their specific situation by means of an **illustration**.

The Lord often used illustrations and examples to explain his message to his prophets, which they in turn passed on to the people. This picture was about a potter and his pots. God told the prophet to go down to the potter's house and watch him at work.

The making of pottery was an essential trade in ancient Israel. They didn't have stainless steel or plastic back then and so they made pots and jars out of clay and they used these to store food and liquid and as containers in which to carry water and corn.

Archaeologists digging around the Ancient Near East have uncovered some complete pots as well as vast amounts of broken pieces of pottery. These are useful for dating archaeological sites.

Many pieces of pottery have been located around Jerusalem. Outside that city on the south side the valley fell away steeply into the Valley of Ben Hinnom. This was the city rubbish dump and was also the place where potters threw out all their broken and chipped pots.

Maybe the potter's house that Jeremiah visited was near that part of the city wall.

When he arrived there he saw the potter working at his wheel. The Hebrew text refers to two wheels. They were mounted on an upright shaft; the potter spun the lower wheel with his foot, and at the same time he worked the soft clay on the upper wheel.

Sometimes as he worked a pot would be marred or ruined in his hands. When that happened he would collapse the pot into a lump of clay once again and remake it into something else.

The fault was not in the potter or any lack of skill; the problem lay in the quality of the clay – it wasn't suitable for the pot he wanted to make, "so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him." (verse 4). This was the illustration.

Then the Lord went on to explain **the meaning** of this picture. Verse 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.'" This is a comparison from the lesser to the greater.

God is like the potter. He is sovereign. He decides what to do with the clay. He forms it and shapes it according to his purpose. The word potter comes from a Hebrew word meaning to form or fashion. That word is used in Genesis 2:7-8 of God *forming* man from the dust of the ground. This is the same word. As the potter God is the one who forms us, who shapes us, who directs our lives, who fashions people according to his purpose. He is all powerful. He is God.

The Apostle Paul expressed this sovereign choice of God even more strongly in Romans 9 in describing the choices of God's election. In our Reformed churches this is one of the distinctive doctrines we hold to. The Bible teaches that from the beginning of time God has chosen a certain number of people to salvation and that he will save those people. Salvation does not "depend on man's desire or effort, but on God's mercy... God has mercy on whom he wants to have mercy and he hardens whom he wants to harden." (Romans 9:18)

The apostle Paul anticipated an objection, and you may have thought of this already – someone will say; “Then why does God still blame us? For who resists his will?” In other words, how can God hold us responsible for something he is doing?!

In response he quoted from Isaiah 29:16 – “Shall what is formed say to him who formed it; ‘Why did you make me like this?’” And then he went on; “Does not the potter have the right to make out of the same lump of clay some pottery for noble purposes and some for common use?” (Romans 9:21).

This teaches us that all people will serve God’s purpose in some way: some will be monuments of his love and grace and compassion; others will be monuments of his justice and righteousness. He is the potter.

And Israel was the clay. This picture also goes back a long way in the Bible. In Genesis 2:7-8 we are told that man was made from the *dust* of the ground. We were made from the earth. We are only clay. Job described men as “those who live in houses of clay, whose foundations are in the dust.” (Job 4:19). These bodies of ours are only “houses of clay” and when we die they go back to the dust. Dust to dust, as we say in the words of the committal. We were made from the dust of the ground and we are clay in the hands of God.

As we consider this truth we need to remember that other strand of biblical teaching – that **we are responsible** for our actions and decisions. What God does with his people depends not only on his will but also on our response to his actions and his words. The covenant has two sides; it has mutual obligations. God has promised to do certain things and we, for our part, are obligated to do something. We are called to obey.

If we obey the Lord then God will make and shape us into a pot intended for a good use, a noble purpose.

If we disobey the Lord and his commands then he will squash us back into a lump and remake and reshape us into a pot for another purpose.

God does not act in an arbitrary manner as he does this. He works in accordance with his covenant promises and curses. He acts in a way that is consistent and just and fair and right. He explained this in verse 7-10.

If a nation did evil and the Lord threatened punishment and they repented then God would relent and would not bring on them the evil he had planned. One striking example of this is the city of Nineveh which repented following the preaching of the prophet Jonah.

But if a nation did what was right and God promised them blessing, and then they turned to evil, then the Lord would reconsider the good he had intended and would punish them.

This was not a change of mind on God’s part but was God’s response to a change in them.

God is the same, yesterday, today and forever. He is immutable, unchanging; but he will respond to our sin and also to our repentance.

Having presented this picture and explained its meaning the Lord told the prophet to **apply this** to the people.

God warned them of punishment. In verse 11 he told them that he was preparing a disaster for them. The word translated as *preparing* is the same root word as for the *potter*. God was all powerful and sovereign and he was about to work out a disaster against them. That disaster would come though the Babylonian army.

In chapter 19 the Lord pictured this punishment in a dramatic illustration. He told Jeremiah to buy a clay jar from a potter and to go out to the city dump at the Valley of Ben Hinnom and smash the jar into pieces. He said; "I will smash this nation and this jar just as this potter's jar is smashed and cannot be repaired." (19:10). God would bring on them the curse of the covenant and they would be punished.

The people of Israel needed to hear this solemn warning because they thought they would be spared any punishment from the Lord. They thought they were God's special jar, a precious pot that would always be kept safe; they thought they were unbreakable. After all, they reasoned, "We are the people of the Lord and the Lord had made his covenant with us." They kept saying, "the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord", as though the temple itself would keep them safe. But just being God's people and having the temple and knowing the law was not enough.

That is true today too. Some of you might think that belonging to the church and knowing the Bible and growing up in a Christian home and attending church and going to a Bible study will make you safe. But these things are not enough. You need a living faith in God; and out of that faith you walk in obedience to God.

The people of Israel did not do this. They sinned against the Lord and broke his commands.

They turned aside from God and forgot about him and worshipped idols instead of the God who made the heavens and the earth (18:15).

The extent of their sin is described in chapter 19:4-5.

The people of Israel had imitated the horrible sins of their pagan neighbours. One of the worst of these sins was to burn their sons in the fire in the Valley of Ben Hinnom as sacrifices to their gods. We shudder to think about that.

But is that so much different from the murder of thousands of unborn babies in NZ today who are sacrificed to the gods of selfishness and materialism and personal convenience! The sin of abortion in New Zealand today is like the sin of child sacrifice in ancient Israel. Both are terrible sins and a worship of pagan gods.

And that, of course, is not all that is wrong with our nation.

Many of the people of our society do not acknowledge God as the Creator of this world.

They do not love him with their heart, soul, strength and mind.

They do not believe in the Lord Jesus Christ. They live selfish and ungodly lives.

They worship the false gods of materialism and consumerism and relativism.

They indulge their sexual desires in unrestrained immorality.

They pervert God's pattern for marriage and distort that into homosexual and lesbian relationships.

God will punish the people do not believe in him and who follow these practices. That is not just an Old Testament idea. Listen to these words from the New Testament: "Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God." (1 Corinthians 6:9-10)

Those who do not inherit the kingdom of God will suffer the punishment of hell.

The Valley of Hinnom was the basis for the New Testament picture of hell. It was abbreviated to *ge'hinnom*, and in the Greek language this became *gehenna*, which our English versions translate as hell. Hell will be something like that burning, smoking rubbish dump in the valley outside Jerusalem. It will be a place where, as Jesus said, "their worm does not die and the fire is not quenched" (Mark 9:48).

In view of all this the Lord urged them to repent. "So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions." The Lord often called the people of Israel to repent and turn back to him. He applied that to each individual – "each one of you". Repentance had to be personal and individual. That is true for us today too. Each one of us needs a personal and living faith in Jesus – children, young people, those who are older – you need to believe in Jesus Christ.

And you must obey God's laws.

Each one of us must follow the Lord Jesus Christ and walk in his footsteps.

This is the only way to be saved.

Sadly, Israel responded by saying; "It's not use. We will continue with our own plans; each of us will follow the stubbornness of our evil heart" (verse 12).

Sadly, there are people today who respond in the same way. Some of have grown up in Christian homes. They know the issues. They understand the Bible. They hear sermons like this one. And knowing all this they make a deliberate choice to turn away from God and follow their own path.

The Scriptures warn us that their punishment will be all the greater – for the more you know the more responsible you are. To whom much is given much is required.

Let's take note of this warning. This is a very sobering passage.

Yes, there are matters here that we don't fully understand.

We do not fully understand this interplay between God's sovereign will and our own responsibility; between what we do and what He does.

But the Bible does make it clear that God is all powerful – He is the potter and we are the clay.

And it makes it clear that we are responsible to God for all of our own choices and all our own sin. We must believe in Jesus and, out of that faith, walk in God's ways.

If you do this you will live.

Amen.