The Potter & the Clay...Jeremiah 18:1-6

Phillip Keller is the beloved author of the books A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23 and A Shepherd Looks at the Good Shepherd and His Sheep. Many years ago I listened to a tape in which he described how he was on assignment to photograph a famous potter in the Hindu Kush Mountains of Afghanistan. The Hindu Kush is a great range with 100 peaks soaring more than 4 miles high. The mountains stretch across the center of Afghanistan like a huge fist 150 miles wide. The scenery is magnificent. There are deserts, grassy plains, soaring peaks and fertile flower-strewn valleys. In a rugged village, high in the mountains, Phillip found the potter's little shack. He tells how he watched him as he went about his work. He examined the pieces of finished pottery on the hut's shelves. The pottery was exquisite, transparent, and shimmering in the light. The pieces were of the most varied shapes Phillip had ever seen. As he watched the man working, the Lord brought some powerful lessons which he shared on the tape.

In the lesson text that Bro. __________ read, the prophet Jeremiah is told by the LORD to go down to the Potter's house. Jeremiah obeyed, going down the winding, narrow street in the lower city of Jerusalem, near the rich clay deposits in the Valley of Ben Hinnom. As Jeremiah entered the potter's house he saw the potter working on his wheel. The King James Version records an interesting historical note in v. 3 where it reads, "...he wrought a work on the wheels." There is no need to wonder if the potter was working on two wheels at the same time when we understand the construction of a potter's wheel in the time of Jeremiah. The potter's wheel of the first century consisted of two parallel clay or stone wheels connected by a shaft. As the potter turned the lower wheel with his bare feet the upper wheel revolved smoothly allowing the potter to shape the lump of clay into a vessel that suited him.
As Jeremiah watched he saw the potter place a lump of clay on the center of the wheel. As it revolved he pressed his thumbs deep into the clay to open up the vessel. Then he drew the vessel into a bowl-like shape by applying upward pressure with his hands. Perhaps, as Jeremiah watched, the vessel began to wobble and crack. Quickly the potter pressed the flawed vessel back into a lump of clay. Then just as quickly he began to shape another vessel from the marred lump.

The Bible contains many illustrations of potters and clay. The potter refers to God and the clay to His people. As we seek to understand the potter’s work, truths about our spiritual lives begin to emerge. Today we would like to share with you some lessons from the potter. We will look at six steps in the pottery-making process and draw out lessons from each. There are lessons God can teach us today from even the ordinary, dirty clay. It's so encouraging, and exciting, to me, to realize that God can use the ordinary simple things and people in his service.

The six steps we will examine with you today are:

1. Gathering the clay
2. Cleaning the clay
3. Shaping the clay
4. Drying the container
5. Firing the container
6. Using the container

1. **Looking first at Gathering.**

Before the potter can start he needs to gather clay. Phillip tells how the old potter in Afghanistan took him out behind his little shed to a riverbank. He lifted a trapdoor and there was his clay bank. It was dirty, dark and smelly. With great care the old potter reached down with his long fingers and felt for the right clay. He didn't take just any clay. He spent a great deal of time picking the exact clay that he wanted. With infinite care he lifted out the proper clay and placed it in his container. Phillip was amazed at the time it took and at the filth he had to sift through to find the clay.
This image reminds us of the horrible pit that we were drawn up from. When the master potter came looking for us He found us in the filth of our sins. We were lost, damned, and without hope. With great love and infinite care our Savior drew us up out of the filthy pit and set our feet on a rock and established our going. With many of us He had to exercise infinite love and patience as we resisted His Spirit's call to salvation. Aren't you glad His grace and mercy extended down into that pit and gave you salvation? Aren't you glad He didn't turn away from the dirty, sinful place where He found us? Aren't you glad His love constrained Him, even while we were His enemies, to, with infinite love and patience provide for our salvation?

2. The second process the clay goes through is the Cleaning process.

With infinite care the potter kneads and molds the clay. He feels for and removes any little twig, stone or impurity. Sometimes this process is done with rods. The clay is placed on a table and beaten with the rod till it is smooth and all the impurities are removed.

How that reminds us of our spiritual lives. After we are saved God turns the great spotlight of His Holy Spirit on our lives and points out areas that need to be removed. The process can be painful but it is absolutely necessary. If the potter does not remove all the impurities and air pockets from the clay it may explode when it is placed in the furnace. This will destroy the vessel and may damage or destroy other vessels which are in the kiln with it.

Just so if we are to be vessels which are useful in God's service we must stay on the table until all the impurities are removed. We must be open and receptive to the Holy Spirit as He instructs us about areas we need to remove. Jesus said,

"He who has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me...If anyone loves me, he will keep my Word....He who does not love me does not keep my words..."
O how we want to rush the cleansing process. How we want to get off the table where we endure the painful probing process or the stinging rod. We must not rush the potter. We must submit to His will. We should say with the psalmist,

1 Have mercy upon me, O God, according to thy lovingkindness: according unto the multitude of thy tender mercies blot out my transgressions. 2 Wash me throughly from mine iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin. 3 For I acknowledge my transgressions: and my sin is ever before me. 4 Against thee, thee only, have I sinned, and done this evil in thy sight: that thou mightest be justified when thou speakest, and be clear when thou judgest.

7 Purge me with hyssop, and I shall be clean: wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow.

9 Hide thy face from my sins, and blot out all mine iniquities. 10 Create in me a clean heart, O God; and renew a right spirit within me.

Only as we surrender to God and allow Him to clean all the dross from our lives will we be vessels fit for the master's use.

After the clay is thoroughly cleaned it is ready to go on the wheel.

3. **The third step is the Shaping on the wheel.**

The potter forms the clay into a lump and places it on the wheel. He begins to turn it and as the lump spins, he moistens his hands and shapes the clay. The moisture is very important. If it's too dry it will pucker and resist. If it is too wet it will refuse to assume the shape the potter desires. Sometimes the clay is sticky and resists the potter's efforts. As he works the clay he may smash it down and start over. He will do this till the vessel is formed to his liking. Sometimes the vessel will form correctly, but then as it nears completion it will collapse or wobble. As the potter completes the vessel he looks upon it with great joy. He can see what will be after the firing and finishing are done. Sometimes the potter will completely change directions and make a different vessel than he started to make. He may take the broken piece of clay that collapsed and make an exquisite vessel from it.
How rich in spiritual lessons this process is. How we resist the potter sometimes. We know absolutely what God's will is in our lives. We know absolutely the area He is trying to change, but we resist Him. Because of our stubborn will He is not able to make a vessel that is useful in His service. O how we need to allow His Spirit to work and shape our lives as He wants them.

How we need to develop a sensitivity to the Spirit's voice in our lives. How we need to obey Him when He speaks to us.

Usually the problem isn't a problem of not knowing what God wants us to do or not to do. It's a problem of our wills. Sometimes in our stubbornness and arrogance we continue to resist Him. How tragic that is and what great harm it causes to our spiritual lives.

Sometimes we allow God to shape us. We yield to Him. But then we resist Him and God has to return us to the wheel. Our service for Him is marred and broken. But like the potter, God can see what will be in our lives. God is a specialist in taking broken, ruined pots and making precious vessels out of them. The secret lies in our confession, repentance, and submission to Him. If you have been marred or broken, don't despair. Allow God the loving master potter to mend and mold you into a beautiful vessel for his service.

This picture is a powerful encouragement for those of us who have failed in some area of our lives. All of us are subject to failure. Sometimes we wonder if God can ever use us again in His service. What an encouragement to realize that we serve a God who specializes in mending broken pots. If we confess and forsake our sins He is faithful and just to forgive our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Climb back on the wheel and yield to the master potter who can make a beautiful vessel again, useful in His service.

After the vessel is shaped, the potter takes a fine thread, moistens it, and draws it across the bottom of the spinning vessel. The thread separates the vessel from the lump. The timing of the separation is very important. The potter knows just
when to draw the thread— not too soon or too late and the result is a vessel which is separated and on its own.

There are lessons we need to learn here. Sometimes we run ahead of God. We think we know His will, but we haven't checked it out with Him. Because of our impatience great harm is done to the cause of Christ. We need to learn to wait on the Lord.

Sometimes we have the opposite problem. We sit and sit waiting for the Lord to send us into service. It is so important to not run ahead of God, but it is just as important to move when He calls— When you are asked to teach that class, when you sense the Spirit asking you to speak to someone about Jesus. When doors open you can assume it is God calling and begin to move. If it is not God, the door will shut. God can guide us so much easier when we are moving in service for Him.

If you are having trouble discerning God's will for your life, pray for guidance, then begin to move in the direction He indicates. If it is His will for your life God will confirm it by causing it to work out smoothly. If you are moving against God's will He will reveal that to you. There are times when it is right to wait for God's leading. There are times when He says wait. When He clearly leads us to move, we must take up the task and begin moving. Did you ever try to turn the wheel of your car while it is standing still? The wheel will resist and protest, but when you begin to move the car forward, you can easily turn the wheel with a finger. God wants us to move in His service so He can direct us to the path He chooses for us.

After the vessel is shaped and separated

4. The potter places it on the shelf for Drying.

The process slows to a halt. Before there was lots of activity. Digging, beating, probing, cleaning, forming, spinning, now there is rest. If the unfired vessel is filled with water it will collapse. If it is handled roughly it will break. The drying and
resting are very important. If the vessel is fired before it is properly dried it will break and be useless.

How that is like us. Sometimes we experience periods of dryness in our spiritual lives. We seem to be on God's shelf and are out of His service. God can use these times to prepare us for greater service. It is important that we rest and see what God is teaching us. It is important that we keep pursuing communion with God even in the dry times. If we persist we will break through into glorious fellowship with Him.

In 1986 two brothers who live in a kibbutz near the Sea of Galilee made an incredible discovery. As these two Israeli fishermen monitored their equipment on the beaches of Gennesaret, they noticed something they'd not seen before. Something covered with mud glistened in the sun. Upon examination archaeologists determined that what the brothers had discovered was a fishing boat dating from the time of Jesus. It could be a boat that Jesus sat in! Maybe the boat he preached from! No one knows for sure, but it's from the time period of Jesus!

The only reason the artifact was discovered was because of a three-year drought, resulting in unusually low water in the lake.

God can use these dry times in our lives to build maturity into us. He can teach us valuable lessons that will increase our usefulness to him. Let's not be impatient when God places us on the drying shelf. Let's look forward to the wonderful things He is preparing us for.

When the vessel has dried sufficiently the potter places it in the kiln for the Firing process.

The temperature must be incredibly hot, appo. 2000º Fahrenheit for the furnace to do its job. As the vessel is fired it experiences changes in its molecular structure which make it completely useful and watertight. The vessel which before the firing would dissolve when water was put into it now will hold water for years.
The vessel that was soft and easily marred is now hard and durable. The fire which burned it caused it to become a useful vessel.

I learned something about pottery recently that I didn't know. Barb and I have had this piece for appo. 30 years. It developed a crazed cracking on the inside. We thought it was defective and took it back to Pfaltzgraf. The lady explained that the bottom surface does not receive the coating of glazing that seals the surface of the piece. If the piece is allowed to stand in water for a length of time it will absorb the moisture through its unglazed bottom surface. The moisture will migrate into the clay and eventually will cause crazing as it is heated and cooled during ordinary use—

As I thought of that I thought about our spiritual lives. All of us have one or more areas where we have to battle with Satan. He knows exactly what our vulnerable areas are. He is an expert at tempting us in those areas. It is so important that we recognize those areas and avoid them. It is important that we be accountable to someone in those areas and we don't give Satan a foothold. Like the clay piece the damage will never happen all at once. It will be a slow process of letting down our guard here or making a small compromise there. Slowly, almost imperceptibly, Satan will steal our spirituality till we are cold and indifferent to God. How carefully we need to guard the bars of our thoughts and our deeds in order to be certain Satan is not taking advantage of us.

Never, never allow yourself to engage in a small or seemingly harmless behavior which you know is sinful. Satan only needs a tiny crack in our Christian armor to get a foothold in our lives. The pores in the bottom of this pot are microscopic in size, but they are enough for the moisture to do its damage. How we need to be diligent to guard the doors and windows to our minds so Satan doesn't enter.

Some of us are in God's furnace today. Our lives are filled with trial and heartache. We wonder if God still loves and cares for us. But dear one, don't lose heart. God the master potter is perfecting and refining you into a beautiful vessel for His service. He knows how much heartache you can stand. He will never give
you more than you can bear. Allow Him to wrap His arms of comfort around you. Lean on the everlasting arms of His mercy and allow Him to make you a vessel fit for His use. There are some very comforting words for the weary in Isaiah chapter 40, NASB:

28 Do you not know? Have you not heard?
The Everlasting God, the LORD, the Creator of the ends of the earth
Does not become weary or tired.
His understanding is inscrutable.
29 He gives strength to the weary,
And to him who lacks might He increases power.
30 Though youths grow weary and tired,
And vigorous young men stumble badly,
31 Yet those who wait for the LORD
Will gain new strength;
They will mount up with wings like eagles,
They will run and not get tired,
They will walk and not become weary.

6. **Ready for Using**

The use of the vessel is determined by the potter who makes the vessel as he sees fit. From the same lump he can make a porcelain vase to be used in a king's palace, or a garbage pot.

Sometimes we aren't satisfied with how God made us or the place He puts us for service.

We need to gladly accept His will for our lives. Never argue with Him and always serve Him wherever He puts you.

Paul says in Romans, "Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?" Of course the answer is no. How ungrateful it is for us to complain to a sovereign God about His will. How unseemly for the creature to complain to the creator about how he/she was created.

The clay that will not yield to the potter's wishes is a constant source of frustration and irritation to him.
The clay that yields to the potter's touch brings happiness and joy to the potter.

The vessel that is finished and useful is a source of joy to the potter. Just so you and I who yield to God's will, who allow Him to cleanse out the impurities in our lives, who gladly surrender to His will for our lives, will be a source of joy and pleasure to the master potter.

As we live our lives for our blessed master, let's determine to be yielded clay in His hands. Let's allow Him to find us, clean out all the impurities from our lives, shape us into a vessel He can use, and let's not complain when we find ourselves in God's furnace. Let's allow the fire to do its work and then go forth to serve Him as beautiful vessels fit for the master's use.

I know many of you have heard it before, but the story of the teacup capsulizes in a powerful way that suffering in God's furnace is to prepare us for His service. Allow me to share it with you:

A man stepped into a china shop. He spied a cup. "Could I.....ttt touch that cup? I've never seen such a beautiful, special cup before! The shopkeeper took it down and handed it to the man. Oh! It was exquisite! He held it up.....he turned it......and then....it began to speak!!

It said, "I wasn't always like this. I was once a lump of clay. The potter picked me up and put me on a turn lathe. I became so dizzy that I yelled, 'Stop!' But he said, "Not yet." So on and on, around and around I went. Then all of a sudden it stopped, and I was put in the oven!

"I can't tell you how that felt! It was indescribable! I yelled, 'Stop!' But he said, 'Not yet' again. Finally, he took me out and let me cool. But next he came with paint and paintbrush and began to put paint all over me! The fumes were unbearable. I thought I would suffocate, and again I yelled, 'Stop!' But again he said, 'Not yet'. 
"After what seemed like an unbelievable amount of time, he put down his paint brush and said, 'There!' and finally set me aside to dry.

"It was good to sit for awhile but the next thing I knew, I was back in the oven, and this time it was even hotter! I thought I was dying and faintly said, "Stop!", but, of course, again he said, 'not yet'. It was the closest to death I have ever felt. When I could barely think and was sure I was breathing my last, and I was ready to completely give up, he tenderly reached for me and took me out and set me in front of a mirror and said, 'Take a look at yourself'.

"And I said with disbelief, 'That isn't me!!' And he tenderly replied, 'You are now a precious vessel! You wanted me to stop the process many different times. But if I would have stopped turning the lathe too soon, you would have crumbled. If I had taken you out of the oven too soon, the hardening would not have held. But you stood the test and now you are a beautiful masterpiece, fit for service. Go and serve now, Beautiful One.'"

As we leave the potter's house today, God the master potter is longing for each of us to yield to him so he can shape us into beautiful vessels to be used in his kingdom.

Will we surrender our wills to his desires and be useful vessels for him? Or will we continue to resist his will and cause him and us pain and heartache? The choice is ours!