

Isaiah 64:8-9 (Opening)

- 8** *But now, O LORD, you are our Father;
we are the clay, and you are our potter;
we are all the work of your hand.*
- 9** *Be not so terribly angry, O LORD,
and remember not iniquity forever.
Behold, please look, we are all your people.*

Introduction

Have you ever found yourself talking to “stuff”?

I know I’m a little strange, but I don’t think I’m that different from most people in that I find myself talking to inanimate objects.

I hope I’m not alone in this, anyway.

You know, you’re walking along at night and you kick something in the dark that you didn’t know was there, so you yell at it. Or maybe the car is acting up, so you decide to have a long talk with it to try to get it to work for you. Or probably more common lately, your computer isn’t working right, so you try to talk it into working for you.

Usually, this isn’t too successful. And hopefully whatever you were talking to doesn’t answer back. Although these days your smart phone would answer back; it may not have anything to do with what you were saying, but it could answer back.

We’ve been working our way through the book of Romans this year, and we’re in the middle of chapter 9. Paul has been discussing throughout this chapter how much he wants all his fellow Jews to understand and follow Jesus as their Messiah. The big argument he’s run into has been that God promised the Jews that they would always be His people, and now He has left them behind. But that’s based on a misunderstanding of God’s promise. God’s covenant with Israel was a blessing if they obeyed Him, and a curse if they didn’t obey Him.

Last week, in Romans 9:18, we read that God has mercy on whomever He wills, and hardens whomever He wills. If we don’t carefully follow what Paul’s been trying to say about the nation of Israel, we could get lost in Paul’s argument, like Paul’s fictitious antagonist who keeps asking questions.

Let’s read Romans 9:19-24.

Romans 9:19-24

¹⁹ *You will say to me then, “Why does he still find fault? For who can resist his will?”* ²⁰ *But who are you, O man, to answer back to God? Will what is molded say to its molder, “Why have you made me like this?”*

²¹ *Has the potter no right over the clay, to make out of the same lump one vessel for honorable use and another for dishonorable use?*

²² *What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,* ²³ *in order to make known the riches of his glory for vessels of mercy, which he has prepared beforehand for glory—* ²⁴ *even us whom he has called, not from the Jews only but also from the Gentiles?*

The Clay

Paul has his fictitious antagonist ask the question “Why does He blame us when we do things wrong if He is the one that hardens our hearts in the first place? We can’t fight against God, so we lose!”

Even Nebuchadnezzar eventually had to admit that he couldn’t win in a fight against God. In Daniel chapter 4, Nebuchadnezzar has a dream, and Daniel’s interpretation was that the king would be driven from his throne by madness, but his kingdom would be retained until he returned. Nebuchadnezzar went mad and roamed in the wilderness like an animal, at grass like an ox, and his hair and nails grew long like the feathers and claws of an eagle. Here’s what Nebuchadnezzar said in Daniel 4:34-35 after his time of madness was over.

Daniel 4:34-35

³⁴ *At the end of the days I, Nebuchadnezzar, lifted my eyes to heaven, and my reason returned to me, and I blessed the Most High, and praised and honored him who lives forever,*

for his dominion is an everlasting dominion,

and his kingdom endures from generation to generation;
³⁵ *all the inhabitants of the earth are accounted as nothing,*
and he does according to his will among the host of heaven
and among the inhabitants of the earth;
and none can stay his hand
or say to him, "What have you done?"

If God is sovereign, who can stand against His will?

That's a funny question really, because we all do stand against His will, at least until we become Christians. Then we at least make an effort to obey and not blatantly disobey His will.

Here in Romans 9, Paul uses an analogy of a potter and clay, comparing them to God and Israel. Remember, Paul's still talking about the disobedience of Israel, not talking about an individual person here. But where does Paul come up with this analogy?

Well, it's used in several places in Old Testament prophecy. Our opening scripture this morning in Isaiah 64:8-9 is one place the potter and clay analogy is used. Isaiah actually uses it three times. The most complete analogy compared to what Paul is saying here is in Jeremiah chapter 18.

Jeremiah 18:1-12

¹ *The word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD:* ² *"Arise, and go down to the potter's house, and there I will let you hear my words."* ³ *So I went down to the potter's house, and there he was working at his wheel.* ⁴ *And the vessel he was making of clay was spoiled in the potter's hand, and he reworked it into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to do.*

⁵ *Then the word of the LORD came to me:* ⁶ *"O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter has done? declares the LORD. Behold, like the clay in the potter's hand, so are you in my hand, O house of Israel."* ⁷ *If*

at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom, that I will pluck up and break down and destroy it, ⁸ and if that nation, concerning which I have spoken, turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I intended to do to it. ⁹ And if at any time I declare concerning a nation or a kingdom that I will build and plant it, ¹⁰ and if it does evil in my sight, not listening to my voice, then I will relent of the good that I had intended to do to it. ¹¹ Now, therefore, say to the men of Judah and the inhabitants of Jerusalem: 'Thus says the Lord, Behold, I am shaping disaster against you and devising a plan against you. Return, every one from his evil way, and amend your ways and your deeds.'

¹² *"But they say, 'That is in vain! We will follow our own plans, and will every one act according to the stubbornness of his evil heart.'*

Jeremiah sees the potter making pots. He puts the clay on the wheel, starts spinning the wheel and making the pot out of the lump of clay. Each place the potter touches the clay, it changes the shape of the lump and eventually it forms a pot.

But not every pot comes out right the first time. Sometimes there's a defect in the clay, a weak spot, or a place that's extra wet, so the potter doesn't like the way the pot looks while it's being formed. The potter has the right to start over and use the same lump of clay to form a different pot.

God said to Jeremiah that this is what He was doing with Israel. He had started out with all twelve tribes, but had re-worked the clay when the pot fell in on itself on the wheel, working with the house of Judah, not all of Israel.

Paul, here in Romans, uses the analogy a little differently than God did with Jeremiah. Paul speaks of two different vessels made from the same lump of clay, one for honorable use and another for dishonorable. Does that mean that God makes us destined either for

honorable or dishonorable purposes, and there's nothing we can do about it, because we can't fight against God's will?

No, that's not what Paul is saying here. If we turn to Paul's second letter to Timothy, we'll see the same analogy used, but a little easier to understand.

2 Timothy 2:20-21

²⁰ Now in a great house there are not only vessels of gold and silver but also of wood and clay, some for honorable use, some for dishonorable. ²¹ Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from what is dishonorable, he will be a vessel for honorable use, set apart as holy, useful to the master of the house, ready for every good work.

Paul is telling Timothy that people can change their ways, those vessels for dishonorable use can be cleansed and used for honorable uses.

God's Forbearance

Verse 22 in Romans chapter 9 is where things start getting a little difficult. I read through six or seven commentaries on this portion of scripture, and they don't completely agree.

The problem lies in one word and the translation of that word from Greek into English. Let's take a look at Romans 9:22 one more time.

Romans 9:22

²² What if God, desiring to show his wrath and to make known his power, has endured with much patience vessels of wrath prepared for destruction,

Here's the big question: who is doing the preparing of the vessel of wrath? Even in English it isn't clear who is doing the preparing. It is happening, but we don't know who is performing that action.

We have two choices in who is performing this action: God, or the vessel. Those are the only two entities in the sentence. And even reading it in English it could be either one.

So, my idea is that the oldest commentary I could find might possibly reveal what Paul is actually saying here. I just happen to have an English translation of the commentaries of John Chrysostom, the Archbishop of Constantinople from 398 AD until his death in 407 AD. He was a native Greek speaker, and wrote commentaries on most of the New Testament.

So, what does John Chrysostom say about who is doing the preparing in Romans 9:22? He says that the vessel is preparing itself for destruction by its actions. This is where the pot and potter analogy starts to fall apart, because a piece of pottery can't actively cause anything to happen to itself. But we, as humans, can cause actions to happen to ourselves. By our disobedience, we bring God's wrath upon ourselves, and by doing that put ourselves in the category of people who are prepared or destined for destruction.

But why would God not destroy those vessels of wrath that Paul is talking about? Let's take a look at what Peter says about God's patience in 2 Peter 3:9.

2 Peter 3:9

⁹ The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

Doesn't that tie in nicely with what Paul is talking about in verses 22-24 of Romans 9, being patient with the vessels of wrath, those unrepentant people who deserve God's wrath, wanting them to repent and become His children? Don't you think that would show the riches of His glory? And what are these vessels of mercy?

Do you remember the definition of mercy? Compassion toward someone who deserves condemnation. How can you receive mercy unless you're deserving of wrath? So the vessels of mercy are those former vessels of wrath that have changed the category that they fall into; they no longer fall into the category of being made ready for destruction, but are now receiving His mercy and grace.

Paul points out in verse 24 who those vessels of wrath who have changed so to be vessels of mercy really are. He says they are not only from the Jews, which is the main argument of this chapter, but also from the Gentiles, those whom the Jews feel are unworthy of being included in God's family.

Conclusion

Aren't we the same as pottery?

Adam was formed from the ground, right? We are no more than very complex pottery, formed by God's hands. But we're not like some grade school student's ash tray (or is it a coaster?). God made us for a purpose, but we're trying to make ourselves in our own pattern, for our own purposes.

God wants us to do one thing: obey His son, Jesus. That's it. It's that easy. Jesus tells us we need to believe in Him, and obey His commands. He commands us to repent from our sinful lives, turn to Him, and be immersed into His death.

If you've been immersed into Christ, and following Him, fantastic! I'm glad to call you brother or sister. If you're still directing your own life, you're headed in the wrong direction. You're preparing yourself for destruction, and not mercy.

Romans 2:1-5 (Closing)

¹ Therefore you have no excuse, O man, every one of you who judges. For in passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, practice the very same things. ² We know that the judgment of God rightly falls on those who practice such things. ³ Do you suppose, O man—you who judge those who practice such things and yet do them yourself—that you will escape the judgment of God? ⁴ Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? ⁵ But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed.

Class

Isaiah 29:15-16

- ¹⁵ *Ah, you who hide deep from the LORD your counsel,
whose deeds are in the dark,
and who say, "Who sees us? Who knows us?"*
- ¹⁶ *You turn things upside down!
Shall the potter be regarded as the clay,
that the thing made should say of its maker,
"He did not make me";
or the thing formed say of him who formed it,
"He has no understanding"?*

Isaiah 45:9-10

- ⁹ *"Woe to him who strives with him who formed him,
a pot among earthen pots!
Does the clay say to him who forms it, 'What are you making?'
or 'Your work has no handles'?"*
- ¹⁰ *Woe to him who says to a father, 'What are you begetting?'
or to a woman, 'With what are you in labor?' "*

Genesis 2:5-7

⁵ *When no bush of the field was yet in the land and no small plant of the field had yet sprung up—for the LORD God had not caused it to rain on the land, and there was no man to work the ground, ⁶ and a mist was going up from the land and was watering the whole face of the ground— ⁷ then the LORD God formed the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature.*