

Date: February 24-25, 2024

Title: Return to Me: Lesson of the Potter

Scripture: Jeremiah 18-19

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Good morning. Let's pray together. God, thank you for just bringing each of us to be a part of this moment. God, I pray that you would speak. That my words, if I've prepared anything that isn't reflective of you and your truth, you would move me away from it. Lord, if there are things at this moment that would be beneficial to those of us who are gathered, that you would prompt me even for things I haven't prepared to say, and it would just point us all to you. And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

So, we started a series a couple of weeks ago that we have called *Return to Me*, and we're looking at these pictures in the book of Jeremiah rather than going through all of the book of Jeremiah. We're looking at these little image object lessons that really hopefully give us a vision of the whole.

What we've said is that Jeremiah in a way, is a plea of the prophet to the people of God of that time to say return to God. I recognize that we all come from different places. Some of us gathered here are leaning into our faith and are praying passionately, daily because we find ourselves in moments of hardship, difficulty, and facing hard decisions. And so, our faith feels alive. And for others of us, maybe we feel a little lethargic in our faith, like we've had faith, and maybe at other times it's been more passionate, and now we find ourselves just kind of saying, well, I'm just kind of doing the same thing. For some, maybe we've actively been running from kind of what we know God wants. Some of us are maybe here just saying I don't even know if I have faith or if I want to have faith, and so I'm exploring what it means.

And yet, Jeremiah's words return to me, come to me, embrace, is the idea of God being the God of your life is the message. What we've said is during this season leading up to Good Friday and Resurrection Sunday, that we wanted to look at these texts because they help us to reflect on who God is. And so, we've looked at the lesson, basically, of broken cisterns. We've looked at the lesson of the soiled linen cloth. And today we're going to look at the lesson of the potter.

Jeremiah 18 and 19 give this lesson where he talks about Jeremiah going to this pottery shop or house and seeing a pot or making a pot. And if you've seen pottery being made, you know that it's an intricate process where it's soft for a while and then it hardens and becomes what it is. Then in the next chapter, he says I want you to go and buy one of these pots, and I want you to smash it. And you're thinking, that's not very cool. And this is to be a lesson about how God feels about his people.

Now, if you were here last weekend, we talked a little bit about Israel, Judah, and the way that the Old Testament works. I'm not going to rehash all of that today, but what he's doing is he's saying you as my people have basically gone your own way and I have this sense of wanting to smash what has been made. And it really reflects in some ways the anger that God feels.

Now, here's my guess, even in saying this, that there are a bunch of reactions. Some of us say anger, God, I don't like that. That's not the God I worship. The God I worship is a God of love.

The God I worship is a God of grace and goodness, not a God who gets angry and smashes pots as object lessons.

And what you know, if you read through the book of Jeremiah, you heard David a little earlier talk about Jeremiah 29, we're in Jeremiah 18-19. So, he does give words of assurance. But first, the people go to Babylon. Babylon is where there's the fulfillment of this prophecy of their nation being shattered. And so, there's an actual historical fulfillment of this prophecy.

Here's what I believe is true in the Bible, and that is the God of the Old Testament is the God of the New Testament. So, when people say, well, the God of the Old Testament is the God who is angry and the God of the New Testament is God of grace, that's not a good bifurcation of who God is, because God works in cycles. And what that means is, is that the way God worked in the Old Testament is a lot of how we see God working in the New Testament. There was a season in which Jeremiah was pleading with the people to return to God before the judgment of God. We live in a time in which judgment is the future, and yet God has not backed away from calling people to himself.

Now, that's the basic idea of this text. So, let me just make four statements that are four applications of this kind to our day and age. The first application is this, and that is we were created in the image of God. You were created in the image of God. And what we see in the Bible is that in Genesis 1 and 2, where we get the creation account, God made man, he made woman, and he created them in his image. And what that means is that every person who's been created is made to bear a likeness to God. That you, as you sit here today, are created in the image of God, that you bear God's image. That's an incredible thing. That's the image of this pot. It's that God is the potter who makes this pot, makes this this piece of pottery.

Now, Ephesians 2 verse ten says about the people of God, the people who've come to faith in Jesus Christ, that they were created as God's masterpiece, some translations say. The Greek word there is the word "poiema," and it means work of art. It means that God is basically saying, I have made my people to be like something that I treasure, that I value, that I prize, that I've made is something unique.

And sometimes, we move right to the anger piece in these Old Testament passages, and we miss the idea that this is who God made you to be. Second Corinthians four talks about how we hold this treasure in jars of clay. This is an image that's used in different places throughout the Bible, and the implication for you is that when you feel hopeless, like your life doesn't matter, like you don't have anything to contribute, God has made you as a work of art. You've been given dignity. You've been given responsibility. Part of what God made you for is to enhance this world and to flourish in this world. And if we miss that, then what happens is we just see God as not really having a right to be angry. So that's kind of the first implication. And that is you, I, we are created in the image of God.

Here's the second implication, and that is God's anger is ultimately justifiable love. And here's why I say this. Jeremiah 19, verses four and five. This is in the smashing pot area. He says, "For they have forsaken me and made this a place of foreign gods; they have burned incense in it to gods that neither they nor their ancestors nor the kings of Judah ever knew, and they have filled this place with the blood of the innocent." So, he's saying here that they've worshiped other gods, but they have been violent to other human beings. So, God

says the way you have interacted in this world with one another has grieved me. Verse 5, "They have built the high places of Baal to burn their children in the fire as offerings to Baal—something I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind." And so now he's talking about how there's this perversion of God's creation.

And so, part of God's anger, and the reason that I say it's justifiable, love, is that if you spend your time making something that's beautiful and useful and intended to flourish, and then somebody who maybe you give it to, takes it and uses it for a perverse purpose, you would be angry and right to be angry because you would say that was never intended to be used this way.

And so, what you get here is you get a sense of God saying through Jeremiah, yes, I created you in my image, but you've perverted my image and used it to do violence in this world. You've used it to bring about a lack of human flourishing rather than actual human flourishing. So, Psalm 7, verse 11 says it this way. "God is a righteous judge, a God who displays his wrath every day."

And again, what I'm hoping that you see is that this idea of wrath is not just some archaic concept of an Old Testament God that isn't worthy of worship because ultimately, if God can't get angry at the perversion of the way that the creation and created beings have rebelled against him, then his righteousness isn't an absolute.

Here's what some people have said about the wrath of God. R.C. Sproul, a noted theologian from another generation said, "A God who is all over all grace, all mercy, and no sovereign and no justice, no holiness and no wrath is an idol." So, a God who is all grace. Basically, he's saying who's all mercy, but not sovereign, not full of justice, not full of holiness is an idol. It's not a real god. Jerry Bridges said, "Jesus did not die just to give us peace and purpose in life. He did it to save us from the wrath of God." And so, what we see when we just look at this is that this idea of wrath is worthy of God because he created us in his image.

And so, he tells Jeremiah here's what I want you to do. I want you to take this pot and in front of the people, I want you to smash it because I want them to know about my anger. So, here's the object lesson. Remember I said this would be a little like the children's sermons. You're like, are you really going to smash that? What do you think? Yes. We did test that to make sure it didn't go too far into everybody's space. Now, that's a dramatic thing to say I made you and here I'm going to let you smash, but you break to pieces. But again, if this is justifiable love, this is part of the cycle of God.

Let me just show you a few passages that talk about God's wrath. This is Romans chapter 1, verse 18. It says, "The wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people, who suppress the truth by their wickedness..." Now, there are different ways that God's wrath is experienced, but here's at least one way. Verses 24, 26, and 28 all give us a little indication that sometimes the way God's wrath works is to let us simply choose the ends that we choose. In other words, it isn't always an active form in which God says I'm going to get you. Sometimes the punishment of sin, our sin, is more sin. Here's what I mean. Verse 24, "Therefore God gave them over in the sinful desires of their hearts to sexual impurity for the degrading of their bodies with one another." Verse 26, "Because of this, God gave them over to shameful lusts. Even their women exchanged natural sexual relations for

unnatural ones." Verse 28, "Furthermore, just as they did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, so God gave them over to a depraved mind, so that they do what ought not to be done."

In translation, God's wrath is revealed from heaven because people say we're not going to follow the God of heaven, we're going to do things our way. God says go ahead, and that degeneration is part of my wrath. Then Galatians chapter 6 says that this way. This is verses 7-10. "Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers." And so, what you have here is you have just this simple idea that God is not mocked, but his anger is justifiable love. And he's saying, I'm going to let your actions have natural consequences. This is ultimately a warning to the unrepentant and to those who say, I don't want to return to God.

That leads me to a third application. Just because God's wrath hasn't been seen doesn't mean that it will not be seen. Now, there are a couple of kinds of divine accountability. I mentioned this idea of a temporal kind of natural consequence. There's also a sense in which there's an ultimate sense of this. At the end of the Bible in Revelation chapter 11, we see that even then the wrath of God is being revealed. Because what you have is God saying you have been these pots that have basically chosen your own path. The ultimate idea in Scripture is this idea that God is not avoiding doing something, but he's giving people time to turn. And so, in an ultimate sense, there's a sense in which God is saying you can live your whole life doing whatever you want, but come to me, I'm giving you time to turn. That's why I haven't judged the world yet. In fact, in Second Peter 3, we're told that the reason basically that it seems so long between now and the coming of God is that he's giving people time to repent.

Then there's this temporal sense that I was just talking about. Romans 1 and Galatians 6 point to this idea that there is a judgment that comes into our lives that in a sense is now. And so, we may think sometimes that injustice is prevailing. This is what the Psalmist thought. Many times it's God, where are you? Why aren't you working? What we need to understand is that sometimes God isn't slow to bring justice or judgment, but it just isn't always immediate. It's not always obvious. And God's patience is not acquiescence. God's patience doesn't mean that God has said this isn't a thing, but it means that God is saying, I'm giving you time to turn.

I've been married for over 30 years now. I like to tell people we got married at age 12, which is obviously not true, but it makes me feel like I'm a little younger. And so, when you've been married a long time, you develop these ways of communicating that are unique to each couple. A while ago brought a box into our garage that I had filled with various things that I think I might need someday that my wife doesn't think I'll need. I put the box between where the two cars were parked because I didn't have a place for it. And to be fair, it's on my side where I get in all the time. But she does not think that the box should be there. The box is there and has been there for months at this point.

Here's what I know. My wife is being patient with my box placement in our garage that doesn't belong there. But it doesn't mean that she's acquiesced to saying you can keep the box there in perpetuity. I can put the box there because she's saying, you know what? It's fall,

winter, spring, you can have it there. But someday she's going to say what are we doing with this box? It's time to move the box. You need to do something with all that stuff that's in the box. And right now, I'm experiencing patience, but wrath is coming. Now, I kid a little bit. If you know my wife, there's not a lot of wrath. But that is patience.

God is patient with you and with me. Sometimes just because you have an experience, the consequences of the choices that you've made doesn't mean that God has fallen asleep or God has just said, okay, it's all fine. There's a pot that's ready to be smashed. Sometimes it's just natural consequences, and sometimes it's something more. But that is not an unworthy way to think of God. And I would even go so far as to say it's the only worthy way to think of God. Because if you don't have a God who can be mad at injustice, then you have a world in which anything is okay. God says I made you for more, so I expect more.

That leads me to the fourth application. The time between is a chance to return to God. Here's what Jeremiah chapter 18 verse 8 says. It says, "...and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned." Now, that bothers some people because some people want to rightly protect the idea that God is not dependent on people and that God does what He wants. Other people rightly want to protect the idea that if we turn, our turning actually matters, that God has not so fixed everything that our choices are irrelevant. But notice what that says. If you turn, I will relent. And it isn't just here. This appears in some other places in the Bible.

My point is this and that is God's way is to say I'm giving you time to turn. Whether ultimately God knows what's going to happen and therefore it's fixed or it's not, is really an irrelevant conversation to your and my heart response to the things of God. What that means is that God is saying I'm giving you time right now where you can say I'm going to return to you, I'm going to align my life with you, I'm going to live by your purposes, by the things that your word says. And that will drive me rather than simply my way of doing things.

Joel says this. Joel chapter 2, verse 13 says, "Rend your heart and not your garments. Return to the LORD your God, for he is gracious and compassionate, slow to anger and abounding in love, and he relents from sending calamity." God calls us to come back, and you may be here saying, well, I don't need to come back. I haven't wandered. That might be true for you for a while. But the truth is we all wander in different ways. And so, the question is, where does my heart, my allegiance, wander from God, and what would it look like for me to come back? If you believe that there's ultimate punishment and that Jesus is the one who died on the cross so that we could have salvation, and if I believe and trust in what Jesus did rather than what I do, that I have ultimate salvation, then it only makes sense to say that God's way is actually better. I don't want to experience the temporal wrath of God either because I want to return even if that's simply the consequence of my own sinful choices.

I read from Galatians 6 earlier. Here's verse 8 again. "Whoever sows to please their flesh, from the flesh will reap destruction; whoever sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life." So, what is not sowing to the flesh mean? It means not making choices that reinforce my own sinful desires, but instead saying yes to the things that are sowing to the spirit that reinforce the spiritual desires. And so, every time that you or I make a choice that is in line with the things of God, it's like God is reinforced in our lives. And every time we make

a choice that's counter to the things of God, it's like that stuff that's counter to God is reinforced in our lives.

John Stott once put it like this. He said, "To sow the flesh is to pander to it, to coddle it, to stroke it instead of crucifying it. Every time we allow our mind to harbor a grudge, to nurse a grievance, to entertain an impure fantasy, or to wallow in self-pity, we are sowing to the flesh. Every time we linger in bad company, whose insidious influence we know we cannot resist. Every time we lie in bed when we ought to be praying. Every time we take a risk which strains our self-control. Every time we read a pornographic bit of literature, we are sowing, sowing, sowing to the flesh. Some Christians sow to the flesh every day, and they wonder why they do not reap a harvest of holiness."

I don't know what that means for all of us who are gathered here, but I know that the distance between experiencing the wrath of God and God saying and calling us to something is a time for us to return. I mean, you know how this is. You go to a doctor, and they tell you that you have something that is a health issue of some kind, that if you don't make some changes, you'll have these things. Well, you have time between to say this is my time right now. And if you just keep saying I'm ignoring it, I'm going my way, then what happens is you just keep going and you will reap basically from the flesh.

Now, I've made a few jumps from Jeremiah and Israel to the New Testament and how God is working and will work. But I believe that they're completely justified when you read the New Testament. The real call here is just to say today, will you examine your life and say, God, I want to sow to the spirit, not the flesh. I want to align my life with you in every way. And so, I want to just take a moment and pray, and I want to invite you just to invite the spirit to highlight anything in your life today that is not in line with God and use this as a moment to turn, to return.

So, would you pray with me? Maybe today, as you're here, for you, there's been a season where you have not been generous or kind with your words towards somebody you love. There's a call to return. Maybe you've been self-focused. Maybe there's a clear area of disobedience in your life to God. Maybe you've chosen not to give of your resources. Maybe you've chosen to indulge in a world of fantasy. Maybe you've just simply chosen to spend all of your time that's discretionary to make yourself feel better through self-medication or binge-watching things.

Sowing to the Spirit could look different for you. And this, in many ways, is just an invitation to say God made you to be a part, a beautiful part, a work of art, to thrive and to flourish. Just say, God, I want to align my life with you so that can be true. I just want to encourage you to take a moment to pray, to return to who Jesus called you to be. God called you to be.

Maybe you're here today and as you're here, you say, you know, I've been frustrated with a lot of things in my life and maybe why God hasn't worked in certain ways. But maybe your frustration is really the broken pot of your own choices. Maybe today is a day to recognize that God created you for more and Jesus has come to this world to redeem you, to buy you back so that you could experience even just a taste of what it means to flourish. Maybe today is your day just to say, God, I know that I've sinned and that Jesus has provided a way. And so, we invite you to pray as well.

God, thank you that you give us time and you are gracious and slow to anger and invite us to return to you. God, I pray that would be the posture of my heart, and the posture of the hearts of all of us who are gathered here today. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.