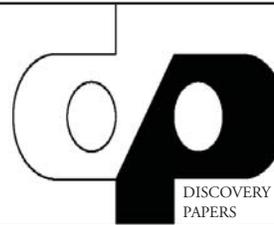


WHO DOES GOD THINK HE IS ANYWAY?

SERIES: WEEPING IN WORSHIP



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Jeremiah 18:1-17
6th Message
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Let's begin with a trivia challenge. I will ask two questions. The first person to correctly answer the first question will win a \$15 gift card. The first person to correctly answer the second question will win an expired grocery store coupon.

That doesn't feel very fair, does it? How many of you think that my trivia challenge is unfair?

Today we're talking about whether God is fair. Last week we talked about why it can be so hard to believe in God. We saw that it is a lot easier to believe in belief in God, but that what God wanted was for us to actually believe in Him. But one of the things that makes that hard for people is that they question God's character. Sometimes we aren't sure we want to turn to Him. And one of the most common complaints is that the God of the Bible doesn't seem to be very "fair." It isn't fair that God uniquely expressed Himself in the person of Jesus. It isn't fair that God has certain intentions for people's sexuality. It isn't fair that there is so much economic and political disparity throughout the world. It isn't fair that He is treating me this way.

And even once we have faith in Christ, we still question God's fairness. Jeremiah did. He accused God of letting bad people prosper while he suffered. He accused God of giving him a raw deal – we'll see more about that next week. I'm sure that you've felt at times that God isn't fair. At least if you've been honest enough with yourself to admit that you've felt that way. Sometimes we feel that way in an abstract sense as we look around the world and just don't understand how God could let things happen to people. Other times, it's more personal. We don't think God is being fair to us.

So this morning we're looking at a passage that addresses this question, "Who does God think He is anyway?" And we're talking about the issue of whether God is fair. The passage we're looking at is Jeremiah 18:1-17. Remember that one of Jeremiah's responsibilities as God's messenger was to tell God's people that He was about to destroy Jerusalem. And the people that lived there didn't really feel that God was being particularly fair in that decision. So this is a passage that addresses that issue and helps God's people to understand why God is doing what He is going to do.

One of the things that I like about this passage is that it is organized just like we tend to organize sermons these days. First, God gives Jeremiah an illustration. Something to help him understand the point that He is trying to make. Then, God explains that illustration and tells Jeremiah the principle or truth that He is trying to

communicate. Finally, God applies it for Jeremiah. He explains how this particular principle applies to the lives of the people Jeremiah is ministering to. So there's an illustration, a principle, and an application. Sounds like a sermon, huh?

The Potter's House

God starts out by inviting Jeremiah on a little field trip. Jeremiah 18:1-4.

This is the word that came to Jeremiah from the LORD: "Go down to the potter's house, and there I will give you my message." So I went down to the potter's house, and I saw him working at the wheel. But the pot he was shaping from the clay was marred in his hands; so the potter formed it into another pot, shaping it as seemed best to him.

So God asks Jeremiah to notice how the potter works. Now, you should understand two things about pottery.

First of all, for a culture like the ancient Israelites, pottery was one of their most critical pieces of technology. We usually don't think of pottery as a form of technology, but it was. It was an invention of a tool that allowed people to live their lives more efficiently. And it was an incredibly important technological advance when it was first used. Imagine a life without any sort of container. Imagine that you had no way to hold water. No way to hold food. Everyone would have to live in very close proximity to water sources. There would be no way to store food or anything. But pottery enabled a whole new kind of lifestyle. That technology enabled the Israelites to live the way they did. It was a critical part of their lives.

Second of all, every village had a potter's house. This was a common feature because everyone needed pottery and pottery always broke. That's why there are rules in Leviticus for what to do if you find mold on one of your pots. It was as common to them as a grocery store is to us. My sister is a medical missionary in Ecuador and when I visited a few months ago, I noticed how every town had carpenters everywhere. It seemed like about every half mile or so, there was a plot of land with wood stacked everywhere and a roof with carpentry tools underneath it. And all sorts of projects everywhere. And my brother-in-law told me that it's usually less expensive to have a piece of furniture made for you by the local carpenter than it is to purchase furniture at a store. That's what pottery was like for Israelites. There were potter's houses everywhere and they were a major feature of their lives.

So the first thing we notice is how God tries to com-

municate His truth. We've seen this before as we've studied Jeremiah. That God speaks in images and uses familiar pictures to people so that they can understand what He is trying to say. And here we see that God reaches out to His people by communicating to them using an illustration of something that was an absolutely essential part of their lives. God reaches out to His people to help them understand Him better. He comes down to their level. God speaks our language.

And this is just a beautiful picture of how God relates to us. We took our kids roller skating this week, which was really fun. But while my daughter Eliana and I were roller skating around the rink, she asked me, "Daddy, why is there gravity on earth but not in space?" Now, that is a question that I barely understand the answer to. So I had to come up with an explanation that might make some sense to a 1st grader. That's what God does here. He wants His people to understand something, so He comes up with an explanation based on what they are familiar with. It's incredible that the God of universe would stoop down to us to help us understand Him, but that's what we see Him doing. God always speaks to people in the language that they understand.

That's part of what can make studying the Bible difficult for us. We aren't familiar with the same things that people in the Bible were. Most of us have never been to a potter's house. This is one of the ways we can help people in our world to understand God and understand the Bible. We can find things that people in our culture understand. This is why I'm convinced that finding spiritual themes in movies and TV's is such a powerful way to communicate. We understand those things. So as we're talking to people about God, we need to find touchpoints with our culture. Which means we need to know them. We need to know what they are familiar with so we can connect with them. That's what God does here. And it's a model for how we can communicate about God to our culture.

The Principle

So that's the image. Now, let's look at how God explains the significance of this image. Verses 5-10:

Then the word of the LORD came to me: "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. If at any time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned repents of its evil, then I will relent and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned. And if at another time I announce that a nation or kingdom is to be built up and planted, and if it does evil in my sight and does not obey me, then I will reconsider the good I had intended to do for it.

So here God makes the connection with the potter explicit. He asks whether He as the creator of His people doesn't have the same authority to relate to them in the

same way as the potter does. But the way that God makes the comparison is interesting. When you first read verse 6, you have this picture of God and His people that is exactly like how the potter relates to his lump of clay. And it's kind of a harsh comparison. God is completely sovereign over His people. God does whatever He deems fit to His creation. He is completely in charge and He just does stuff.

This is the way that many people in the world understand our God. This is the way that we even think about our God at times. He is a potter. We are clay. He does whatever He wants. We just have to live with it. There's a blog online called "debunking Christianity" and one of the posts that I read is titled "God is a sadistic monster." That's one of the pictures that our culture has of God. And I think that picture is actually supported by this image of God as a potter.

But that's only true if you stop reading at verse 6. Because if you read the next four verses, you realize that God is doing something very interesting with this analogy. He's actually using the imagery of the potter and the clay to show that it is insufficient to describe the full relationship of God and His people. These verses talk about God responding to His people. About God changing His plans if His people change their behavior. A lump of clay doesn't change its behavior. A potter doesn't respond to His clay if His clay decides to repent. A lump of clay is passive. But God's people are *people*. They aren't inanimate objects being presided over by a sadistic creator. They are individuals who make decisions. They respond to their creator. And their creator responds to them.

That is what God is describing in these verses. So this analogy is being used partly to show how similar God's relationship to His people is to the potter and the clay. But partly it shows how much deeper God's relationship is to His people than whatever the potter and the clay have. This is a common tool in Scripture. An analogy is used in a "how much more" comparison. Some picture gives you a taste of what you're talking about, but the actual reality is far deeper. You see this a lot in Paul's writings in the New Testament and it's common in a lot of the Old Testament as well. What is being described here is a personal relationship. A dynamic relationship between two parties where the action of each party affects the behavior of the other party. That's a relationship. A free relationship between two free persons. And that is how God relates to His creation. Not as inanimate objects, but as free persons.

So the picture of the potter demonstrates that in reality, it is completely fair for the potter to have total sovereignty over the clay. He is, after all, the creator. And so even though the Israelites might not think it is fair that Jerusalem is being judged, God as the creator has complete sovereignty over them. It actually is fair. But then when this illustration gets explained, we see that we're talking about something deeper than being fair.

There's a song I like called "Call and Answer" by the group Bareneked Ladies. The song is about a romantic

relationship; the woman is trying to make sure everything is equal in their relationship, but the man wants something more. One of the verses expresses this dynamic beautifully:

*You think it's only fair to do what's
Best for you and you alone
You think it's only fair to do the same
To me when you're not home
I think it's time to make this something that is
More than only fair*

*So if you call, I will answer
And if you fall, I'll pick you up
And if you court this disaster
I'll point you home.*

It's time to make this something that is more than only fair. You see, a real relationship isn't based on fairness. It's not based on making sure that each partner is treated equally in all possible situations. A real relationship between two people is more than only fair. It involves adjusting to each other and sacrifice. It's more than fair. It's responsive and dynamic. That's how God describes His relationship with His creation. And that's what this image is really supposed to help us understand. God could treat His people just like the potter treats the clay. That would be fair. But He goes farther. God is more than fair.

And this is amazing. That God as our creator would treat us this way. There are some amazing stories throughout the Old Testament of people talking God out of doing things. That is incredible. The clay doesn't talk the potter out of anything. But God uses that picture to show us that His relationship with us is so much deeper than the potter's relationship with the clay.

One of the complicated things about a relationship that is more than fair is that it can seem to rewrite the rules. You see, we confuse "fairness" with something that always happens. If I decide that I'm going to give my children ice cream for breakfast every morning for a week, they will love it. They won't complain that it isn't fair that they should have dessert before eating any kind of substantive food. But if the next week, I change my mind and stop giving them ice cream for breakfast, I'm 100% sure that I know what their complaint will be. "It's not fair." You gave us ice cream every day last week.

You see, when someone treats us in a way that is more than fair, we start to change the definition of fair. We assume that the way we are being treated is fair. And then if things change, then we cry foul and claim that the new situation isn't fair because it doesn't match up to what we are used to. So God explains in this passage that His relationship with His people is more than fair - He responds to them dynamically. But He also says that there may come

a time when it doesn't feel fair. If He tells them that He is going to bless them a certain way and then they reject their relationship with Him. If they completely disobey Him, then He will cancel the good that He was going to do. And that won't feel fair. Because we will be expecting to be treated a certain way and we'll think that we deserve to be treated that way. So for things to change won't feel fair to us at all.

Jesus tells a parable about this in Matthew 20. He talks about a vineyard owner that hired workers to work in his vineyard. And he agreed to pay each of them a denarius for a day's work. But then at different points during the day, he went out and hired more workers. The last group of workers started so near the end of the day that they barely worked an hour before the workday was over. When the vineyard owner started paying these workers, he started with the ones hired last and paid them a full days wage. So the ones that actually worked a full day thought they'd be receiving even more. But they didn't. They received exactly what they had been promised. And what was their response? They said that it wasn't fair.

Now, I'm willing to bet that none of you came to church today expecting to get a Peet's gift card from me. So it's fair that most of you didn't. Except as soon as one person among you received one unexpectedly, some part of you probably felt that it isn't fair that you didn't get anything. And the person who got the expired Starbucks coupon certainly didn't feel like things were fair.

This happens on a macro level as well. A few years ago, there was a book published called *Desire of the Everlasting Hills* by Thomas Cahill. The book was about Jesus and the impact He has had on Western culture. Now, Thomas Cahill is not an evangelical Christian. But one of his suggestions is that many of the values of Western culture came from Jesus. In particular, the idea that self-interest is evil is a distinctive cultural value that seems to have originated with Jesus. So what has happened is that the character of Jesus introduced some values to our culture about avoiding self-interest and the inherent worth of the individual. And now those very values are so central to our culture that people look at the Christian God and say that He seems too self-centered. And He doesn't seem to honor the value of individuals. But the irony is that He is the reason we think those things are important. People call our God a sadistic monster. But in ancient culture, all the gods were sadistic monsters. Where did the notion that gods shouldn't be sadistic monsters come from? Jesus. But our idea of fair has changed and now we judge Him as not being fair.

So this passage does two things. First, it affirms that God is fair. In fact, He is more than fair. But secondly, it tells us that we aren't always going to think that God is fair. This passage tells us that our normal experience is going to be one of perceiving God to be unfair at times. Because He is merciful, because He is generous, we think the bar is set higher. We have higher expectations. And so when He does draw the line, it won't seem fair at all. At least

from our limited perspective. And that's encouraging to me: to know that it isn't surprising that God doesn't *seem* to be fair. God's people have always struggled with that. And they always will.

The Application

So we started out by looking at the illustration that God gave Jeremiah: a potter and his clay creation. Then we saw the principle that God was illustrating through this image: God relates to His creation in a similar way to the potter and the clay, but with more freedom. Finally, we have the application of this principle to the current situation of the Israelites. Jeremiah 18:11-17:

“Now therefore say to the people of Judah and those living in Jerusalem, ‘This is what the LORD says: Look! I am preparing a disaster for you and devising a plan against you. So turn from your evil ways, each one of you, and reform your ways and your actions.’ But they will reply, ‘It’s no use. We will continue with our own plans; each of us will follow the stubbornness of his evil heart.’” Therefore this is what the LORD says: “Inquire among the nations: Who has ever heard anything like this? A most horrible thing has been done by Virgin Israel. Does the snow of Lebanon ever vanish from its rocky slopes? Do its cool waters from distant sources ever cease to flow? Yet my people have forgotten me; they burn incense to worthless idols, which made them stumble in their ways and in the ancient paths. They made them walk in bypaths and on roads not built up. Their land will be laid waste, an object of lasting scorn; all who pass by will be appalled and will shake their heads. Like a wind from the east, I will scatter them before their enemies; I will show them my back and not my face in the day of their disaster.”

So here is the application to God's people. He refers back to the principle that He just explained. He says that He is preparing a disaster for His people. He warns them, but He gives them a chance to repent. They have the chance to change. And God just finished telling them that when His people change their ways, He will change His mind about destroying them. But in verse 12, God says that they have already made up their minds. They won't change their ways, they won't respond to God's discipline. And so the disaster will come upon them. And this is amazing. Incredible that a people wouldn't stop acting a certain way even though they have been warned that their behavior is going to result in disaster.

Jerry Seinfeld has a great comedy routine about the invention of helmets:

There are many things you can point to as proof that the human is not smart. But my personal favorite would have to be that we needed to invent the helmet. What was happening, apparently, was that we were involved in a lot of activities that were cracking our heads. We chose not to avoid doing those activities but, instead, to come up with some

sort of device to help us enjoy our head-cracking lifestyles. And even that didn't work because not enough people were wearing them so we had to come up with the helmet law. Which is even stupider, the idea behind the helmet law being to preserve a brain whose judgment is so poor, it does not even try to avoid the cracking of the head it's in. (Emphasis added.)

And this is what God says about Israel. They are headed for disaster. God is going to destroy Jerusalem. The temple will be leveled. Unless you turn back to me. And they say, “No thanks, we'll continue with our own plans.” We're fine. And God is amazed. Who ever heard of such a thing? This is really similar to the question God was asking last week. Even the nations, those people who don't know the living God aren't as dumb as this. And yet Israel, who should be God's precious virgin bride has slept around with all the other gods around her. And she's going to keep doing it. It's unbelievable.

The comparison is made between the snow of Lebanon and Israel. God points out that the snow on the mountains of Lebanon never leave the mountain. In fact, if the snow were to leave the mountain, it wouldn't be the “snow of Lebanon” anymore. It would just be snow. What makes it the snow of Lebanon is that it is on the mountains of Lebanon. What makes Israel Israel is their relationship with YHWH. Israel is the people of YHWH. If they turn away from YHWH, they'll stop being Israel.

And yet they are confused. They think that if they are sent away from the land, that they'll stop being Israel. But the land isn't what makes them Israel. It's their relationship with YHWH their God. So they are all upset because they think that being kicked off their land is going to make them lose their identity. But God is pointing out that they've already given up their identity. They've forgotten their God. And their identity comes from Him, not the land.

So what's God going to do? He'll take away their land. Hoping that in exile they will realize that they can still be Israel without their land, because they can still relate to the God of Israel. But if they won't relate to Him when they are in their land, there doesn't seem to be much hope that they'll turn to YHWH once they are in exile.

What God is doing here is exactly what we saw the potter doing. God's creation isn't going the way He intended it to go. This clay pot that He's shaping isn't what He hoped. He's done what the potter never does – he gave His people a chance to change. But they didn't. So now He'll do what the potter does right away. But notice that the potter doesn't just throw away the clay he was working on. He doesn't just cast it aside and give up. He lumps it back together and starts over. So that's what God is going to do. He's not giving up on His people. Their exile feels like the end to them, but it isn't. He's starting over. There comes a time where being turned away from Him has consequences. But He won't abandon His people. He'll remake them. God remakes His people. God remakes us.

The problem is that remaking something begins with

destroying it. When Jeremiah went to the potter's house, he saw the potter take the lump of clay he was working with, smash it into a ball and then start over to build something else. Well, here we see God taking His people and smashing them into a ball. We don't see the starting over part, but it's implied. This destruction is for a purpose. There is something new God is doing on the other side. But when you're on this side of being smashed, it can be hard see anything but the smashing part. The new construction part can seem kind of distant and irrelevant. That's what God says to His people here. "Their land will be made waste." "I will scatter them before their enemies." God is destroying Jerusalem. All the evil that they have been taking part in is coming crashing down on their heads.

What God often does is to take away the things that we think are integral parts of our identity, but may not be. For the Israelites, that was the land. For us, it could be health, or prosperity, or our families, or competence, or whatever it is that we just are convinced is a critical part of our relationship with God. Something God would never take away from us. This doesn't mean that He'll always take away those things. It doesn't mean that if you get sick, it means that you had made an idol of your health and since I didn't get sick, I hadn't made an idol of my health. It just means that this is one of the ways that God works in our lives. He remakes us. He asks us to walk through very difficult things so that His work of preparing something new has room to grow. He destroys so that He can rebuild.

Rebuilding something involves pain. It's like a developer who buys an old house on a nice lot so that he can tear down that house and build a nicer one in its place. That involves some demolition, some clearing away of debris, but eventually, that makes room for something new to be built. Something better. And so we see that there will be seasons in our lives when God asks us to walk through really difficult times. But it is all a part of Him building something new. Some people here have never been through times like that. This passage helps us to understand that those times will come. Some people here might be going through a time like this right now. This passage helps you to see that God is remaking you, not destroying you. He hasn't abandoned you, even if it feels like whatever you are experiencing just isn't fair. He's at work. And some people here have been through seasons like this and have come out the other side. You can help the rest of us to know that God really does work this way, that there really is something on the other side of that pain. That even though it seems unfair, God really is more than fair.

Conclusion

And that leaves us with the question, "Who does God think He is?" Because the most dangerous thing about

these situations is that they can turn us away from God. What God intends to use in our lives to help us return to Him can be places where we give up and lose faith in Him. There were some Israelites who went into exile and didn't realize that God was doing something new. They thought God had abandoned them for good. So they gave up on Him.

Last week I suggested that the fact that I don't understand everything about God makes me more convinced that He is real than if I had all the answers. And I think this falls into the same category. If God really did create me and you and the people living in New Zealand and Iran and South Africa, then I need to accept the fact that I'm not going to be able to fully understand what He is doing in this world. If God really is God, shouldn't I expect that from my limited perspective, there will be things that just don't seem fair to me?

This passage helps us to see that we are going to feel that way. We will go through times when we feel like God isn't being fair. We'll go through times when He takes away what we thought we can't live without. We should expect those times. But this passage also tells us that He is there with us. He reaches down to us and speaks our language. He is more than fair to us. And He isn't destroying us. He is remaking us.

When I did my trivia challenge at the beginning of this message, most of you didn't question my character and think that I was just being mean. If it worked, you wanted to know what I was getting at by creating what seemed like an unfair situation. That's the question that we want to bring to God. The temptation when it seems like God has abandoned us is to abandon Him. Don't. Tell Him that you don't think He's being fair. Tell Him again tomorrow. Yell at Him if you need to. Ask Him who He thinks He is. But don't leave Him. Don't walk away from Him. Stay with Him. Because His story is moving toward new life. Even when it crosses through death, life is on the other side. This side of the life to come, you might never get to a place where you understand all of God's purposes. I'd be surprised if you did. But stay with Him. We'll see eventually. And we'll be amazed.