**VOLUME 1; CHAPTER 4 - THE PREACHING OF G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

**THE POTTER'S WORK ON THE WHEELS by G. CAMPBELL MORGAN**

*Then I went down to the potter's house, and, behold, he wrought his work on the wheels.*

*Jeremiah 18:3*

THE FIGURE OF THE POTTER AND THE CLAY IS PERENNIALLY attractive. Perhaps it has not been so popular in recent years as formerly. There is a note of severity about it, of which our softer age has been afraid. In every age characterized by strength the figure of the potter has been one of those most often used by the prophets and messengers of God. It is interesting to notice that in the Bible it is used by the men mightiest in their personal thinking and in the influence they exerted on their age. Four Bible writers use it, perhaps borrowing it from each other. Whether that be so or not, they are men of peculiar strength: Isaiah, a man of clear vision of God's uplifted throne; Jeremiah, a man of deep understanding of God's heart of love; Zechariah, a man who saw further than any Old Testament prophet, and whose book is a veritable apocalypse not yet fulfilled; and Paul, the man of massive thinking and keen penetration to the heart of the philosophy of the Christian religion.

This figure contains a deeper note than that of its severity, which, when discovered, explains and justifies that severity of which some of us have been afraid, and in the presence of which we still tremble. To refer again to the men to whom I have made reference, it will be seen that while they were men of a severe note, yet to speak of severity as their final note would be to misinterpret them altogether. The thunder of Isaiah perpetually merged into the plaintive wail of his tender love as he expressed the thought of God concerning the sinning people; Jeremiah's deepest and profoundest note was reached when he cried: "Oh that my head were waters"; Zechariah looks on to great consummations, to the outworking of the infinite love and pity; and although Paul, with pitiless scorn and sarcasm, tracks sin until we see it in its deepest and inner meaning, he is also the man who says: "I call God to witness I could be accursed from Christ for my brethren's sake." Wherever you find a man of strong outlook and severe note you find him using the figure of the potter sooner or later, but you also find him melting into tears, a man moved with compassion.

I want tonight, as God shall help me, to bring you back to this old and familiar figure, that we may consider its application to personal life. In the passage which I read to you from Jeremiah the figure is used in relation to national affairs. It is almost invariably so used in the Old Testament. We are perfectly justified in arguing from the nation, which is composed of individuals, to the individual lives, which constitute the nation. There are national applications even today of this great message, upon which I do not propose to touch. I desire to take the principle here revealed and apply it to our individual and personal life.

In the passage from which my text is taken the picture of the potter is given in all simplicity and clearness of outline. Jeremiah is seen going down to the house of the potter, and in imagination we accompany him. If we have ever been to the house of the potter we have been in very close comrade-ship with Jeremiah, for among all the changes that have taken place in manufacture the house of the potter is almost exactly today as it was in the olden days. There have been some small changes in the matter of the wheel, but practically no change in essential things, the potter and the clay. So we may imagine we are standing with Jeremiah in that actual house, and seeing exactly what he saw.

Let us look at these things in all their simplicity, with-out any reference for the moment to the teaching suggested. What did Jeremiah see? He saw the potter, the wheel, and the clay. In the potter he saw an intelligent and capable worker; in the wheel an instrument by which the worker accomplished a definite purpose in the clay; and in the clay a capable material, something with which it was possible for the potter to accomplish his purpose. These facts constitute the essential revelations of the potter's house for all time concerning the relationship which exists between God and man.

The potter speaks first of God's authority, and we are afraid of the figure because we stay there. That is not all, the potter speaks also of God's interest and God's perpetual attention, and finally of God's absolute power. Looking at the potter as he sits at the wheel and places his hand upon the clay, I am conscious of his right and authority over the clay, but if I watch him more closely, I also see his keen interest as the clay changes its form under his fingers. If I watch yet more carefully I see his close and unvarying attention to his work; his eye is never lifted from the clay while the wheel revolves and his hand is moulding. Having started with his authority and observed his interest and unvarying attention, I also recognize his power. Those hands which press so gently, or so heavily, are hands of power, infinite so far as that clay is concerned.

Turning from the potter, I look at the wheels upon which the clay is turned, and they speak to me of all the circumstances in the midst of which I find myself. I think that perhaps the truth concerning these wheels can be told most expressively in the words of Browning:

... this dance,

Of plastic circumstance,

This Present, thou, forsooth, wouldst fain arrest:

Machinery just meant

To give thy soul its ben',

Try thee and turn thee forth, sufficiently impressed.

The wheel is incidental, necessary but transitory, to be flung aside when the potter remains and the clay has found its final form and shape. The things of supreme moment are the potter and the clay.

The clay speaks of man's capacity and relation to God. It is of plastic nature; it can be moulded. There are other forms of matter which you never find upon the wheel of the potter. There is never any attempt on the part of the potter to mould steel filings into form for beauty or for use. Clay is material which will take the impress of the potter's fingers.

These are the simplest lessons of the potter's house. There I see God and myself and all the circumstances of my life: the intelligent Master Workman, with the thought in His mind which no one has ever seen; myself of such a nature as to be able to express that thought for others to see it; and all the circumstances of my life, turning wheels, so swiftly turning oftentimes as to make me afraid, presently to be set aside when the vessel is fashioned. So in the potter's house, the simplest of all manufacturing centres and yet the sublimest, for here art and artifice meet, I learn the profoundest lessons of what man's relationships to God really are.

I shall ask you, then, to follow me as I attempt to lead you, first, to the discovery of the principle taught; secondly, to the recognition of purpose suggested; and, finally, to the knowledge of the Person who chooses to stand revealed in this ancient figure as the Potter. Unless these three things are recognized we shall surely rebel against the whole conception. If we simply discover the principle of this figure we shall be afraid. We must also find the Person of the Potter. It is this last quantity which we have too often missed in our consideration of this wonderful figure. We have too often preached the principle of submission to God's absolute sovereignty without reference to the character of God. I shall never submit myself to the principle, so frail and weak and afraid am I, until I see the Potter. If I can but see Him, and know Him, then as plastic clay I shall yield myself to His hand, knowing that in this figure, severe and strenuous, there is the music of infinite tenderness, and patience, and love.

On the other hand, if a man know the Person, and refuse to obey the principle, or accept the purpose, he will fail. The principle taught is that of the absolute sovereignty of God and the necessity for the submission of man thereto. The potter has a right which is absolute over the clay. It cannot resist his hand finally. It has no right to suggest to him what form or fashion it shall take. We hear much today of the rights of man. The first truth which the potter's house teaches is that of the rights of God. Our fathers expressed the truth in a way which we would never care to use, and yet it is sometimes well to go back and listen to the tremendous and overwhelming emphasis which they laid upon it. It is told of a pastor of one of the New England churches in the olden days that he almost invariably asked candidates for membership, "Are you perfectly willing to submit yourself to God whatever His will concerning you may be? Are you willing, if you knew it would be for His glory, to be eternally shut out from His presence?" That question is entirely out of place, since God has said that He willeth not the death of any sinner; and yet at the back of it there is a tremendous truth, of which we are in danger of losing sight - the truth that no man would have any right to complain, whatever God decided to do with him. We know what God would do, He willeth that all should come to Him and live. That is the purpose of God for all, but, knowing that, we must not minimize this other tremendous truth of God's sovereignty. Shall man challenge God? God has a right to take this whole world and annihilate it and sweep out the race that has condemned His law and turned its back on all His infinite love.

Therefore, man's right in the presence of God is that he should have no wish, no claim, no desire of his own, save only to discover the wish, the claim, the desire, the right of God.

But I can quite imagine that someone is stating a difficulty. The clay has no will, and I have will. The clay has no power to choose, and I have power to choose. I was created by this selfsame God with will and the power to choose. Therein lies disparity, and the figure is spoiled by the disparity. Not at all. The distance between God and man is greater than the distance between the potter and the clay. The distance between the infinite will and the finite will is far greater than the distance between the finite will and the thing that lacks will. When you are working out your ratios of comparison you must be very careful to remember that when you compare the infinite with the finite in any form you have a greater distance to bridge than between the finite and finite in any form. What is will? The power to choose within limitation. Will answers a governing principle. It never acts, save with something at the back of it that drives it. Consequently, the highest exercise of will is the choice of the governing principle, the choice of that which shall be master. When God gave man will, He did so that man might choose his master, that he might either submit himself to the one eternal throne of God, which, in turn, is dominated by righteousness and love, or submit himself only to himself, to his own ruin. So far, man has will. Every man and woman, youth and maiden, and child will choose for himself his master, his ruling principle, and so his destiny. God allows man to make his choice, but when he chooses he is still acting under the government of God, and he cannot finally escape therefrom. He will choose truly if he does so by the principle revealed in the house of the potter, saying as he chooses: "Our wills are ours ... to make them Thine." Any other exercise of the will is prostitution of the power bestowed, and must issue in the ruin of the one who makes such use of it. So that while there is a difference between the potter and the clay, on the one hand, and God and man on the other, the distance between potter and clay and the distance between God and man are not equal. If the finite man has a right to complete authority over clay, which is finite matter, much more have the infinite and eternal mind and will of God the right to claim absolute authority over the finite mind and will of man. Thus, the teaching of this picture as to principle is the sovereignty of God, and the fact that man's wisdom lies in unconditional and uncompromising surrender to that will of God, of which man's will is but the spark and offspring.

But there is purpose manifest as well as principle. "Behold, he wrought his work on the wheels." The potter has a thought in his mind for the clay, and he alone can transfer that thought to the clay. The clay is necessarily ignorant of the thought in the potter's mind, but can find that thought, and realize and manifest it by quiet submission to the hand of the potter. My brethren, when I pass from this great principle, which I confess taken alone fills me with fear, to notice that there is a purpose, my heart begins to find comfort. The potter, as the wheel revolves, is not dealing capriciously with the clay; his fingers are not working aimlessly. As I watch him in the beginning of the work I cannot see what he means, but he knows what he means, and as his hands rest upon the clay he is translating into the outward and manifest the thought of beauty and use which is in his own mind and heart. The clay gains in the potter; the potter gains in the clay. The clay is shapeless as clay, but the clay plus the potter becomes a thing of beauty and of use. The potter has in his mind a thought of beauty, which none but himself can see apart from the clay, but the potter plus the clay can express his thought so that others may see it. Here I think we touch one of the deepest mysteries of human life. Man is created that God may have a medium through which He can manifest the things in His own mind. Man is fashioned in His likeness, in His image, that those who cannot see the essential and eternal Spirit may yet see the things of the essential and eternal Spirit in man. How man has missed his mark, and yet by the redemption of Jesus Christ this great purpose is fulfilled. Paul declared: "We are His workmanship." What Paul really writes is, "We are His poetry," not that the Apostle meant we are His poetry, but His work of art, that through which He gives others to see the things of beauty resident in His own infinite mind. This same truth is expressed in Peter's words: "Ye are an elect race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God's own possession, that ye may shew forth the excellences of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvellous light." God gains in men that through which He can reveal Himself as the potter gains in the clay the medium through which he can express his thought. But the other side is also true. See what the clay has gained. It was but a shapeless thing, lacking beauty, lacking expression of anything that has refinement in it, lacking utility; but it gains from the hand of the potter form and shape and usefulness. Man alone is as the clay, lacking beauty, lacking true utility, making shipwreck of his own personality; but let man find God's throne and yield to it, submit his whole life to the hands of the great Master Potter, and he finds the poor clay of his life made into something fair and beautiful and full of use to God and to man. You came into this house tonight saying, My life is purposeless. Give it to God, and it will be purposeful. You said, These years have gone from me, twenty, thirty, forty, and I have done nothing. Yield to God and the Potter's hand will be upon you to mould and to make. It may be that the moulding and making will not yet be recognized by your fellow men. That matters nothing. It may be that the moulding and making will be that of a thing of use rather than of beauty. It may be that He will mould you to some service that men count menial. There is no menial service which the King appoints. There must be yielding to the Potter, but then, oh, soul of mine, when thou art so yielded purpose is the story of thy life.

We go yet one step further in this study. The thought of sovereignty is terrible, and the principle is enough to affright the heart of man. So also is the purpose unless I know the Person. Tyranny may have purpose, but I am afraid of purpose if you only speak of it. Tyranny may demand submission, but I am afraid of submission if you only speak of it. If you bring me to the potter's house and say to me, See the potter and his authority, and yield; see the potter and his purpose, and yield, I will not speak for anyone else, but I am afraid. I know there must be some authority, but I am afraid when I am asked to yield to this infinite authority, although I know there ought to be some purpose. But what is the purpose?

The figure of the potter's house is never perfect until you have passed beyond the principle and the purpose to the Person. Who is the potter? That is the final question before I can yield. There need be no argument, for the answer has been given by revelation in a Person. God is the Potter. Who is God? There is only one answer: "God is love." I might have given a hundred answers. I might have said God is righteousness, is holiness, is beneficence, but I want to gather up all the possessions and express them at once; and when I want to gather up all the characteristics and write them as character there is only one answer: "God is love."

I can submit to love. Now I am not afraid of the purpose. This is the quantity we have too often lost sight of when we have preached about the potter's house. Suffering one, how those hands of God have pressed some days upon the clay, and this clay is feeling, thinking, suffering clay. Oh, how these hands have pressed, but they are the hands of God, and God is love. That great truth is established. I am not going to insult God by arguing it. We know it. The thought of the Potter is love as He moulds the clay upon the wheels, and remember He governs the wheels as well as the clay. There ought to be comfort in that for someone. He comes, not only with a thought of love, but with such a nature of love that all the process is a process of love, and if He break by the pressure of His hands it is but to make; if He crush, it is but to create.

I bring you to the principle taught in the potter's house and tell you that until you have learned it, until you submit to it, your life is failure. I bring you to the fact of purpose taught in the potter's house, and tell you, here is infinite comfort if you will but have it so; your life may be purposeful. If I leave you there I leave you afraid, so I bring you finally to the Person. Would we know what the heart of the Potter is we must see it transfixed with wounds upon the brutal cross. Would we know the real meaning of the Potter's hands we must see them with wound prints in them. Would we know the deep truth both as to principle and purpose we must lay our weary heads upon the bosom of God, and feel the beating of the infinite Heart. When I feel that, then I can trust, then I can submit to the principle, then I can consent to the purpose.

My last word to every man and woman, Christian or not, is this: to revel is to take the clay out of the Potter's hands and to render it purposeless and useless - waste - in the economy of the universe. Oh, the wrecks in the potter's field! Vessels half formed, and marred and flung away. The potter's field is full of wreckage, lives that might have been fashioned to forms of beauty, but that they would not yield to the hands of the Potter.

I cannot leave my story with that solemn word of warning. I am perfectly willing that you should charge me with fanciful interpretation, but the potter's field is last mentioned in Scripture in strange company. They bought the potter's field with the price of Him Whom they priced, and they called it, little thinking how deep the significance of their calling might be, the field of blood. Are there some wrecks in the potter's field in this house tonight, men and women who are saying, I have been spoiled and flung away. I am waste in God's universe. The potter's field has been purchased with blood. I come back to Jeremiah, and I read that when the vessel was marred in the hands of the potter he made it again another vessel. Blessed be God, He came to the potter's field, and He gathered up the wrecks to make them again. There is another chance for you, my brother. By the mystery of His betrayal, by the mystery of His denial, by the mystery of His being sold for the price of a slave, the potter's field is bought, and though you have missed your purpose by disobeying your principle, the Person, the Potter Himself, has come down to the midst of the wreckage, and by the price of His own mysterious life has bought it, and the wreck can be remade. But you must begin with the Person and submit to the principle, and find the purpose. May God help us all to do so.