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RESERVED OR REJECTED?

Today's Text: Jeremiah Chaps 18-19

Extracts:

1. The word which came to Jeremiah from the Lord, saying, "Arise and go to the potter's house, and there I will cause you to hear My words." Then I went down to the potter's house, and there he was, making something at the wheel. And the vessel that he made of clay was marred in the hand of the potter; *so he made it again into another vessel, as it seemed good to the potter to make.* Then the word of the Lord came to me, saying; "O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter?" says the Lord, "Look, *as the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand*" [Jer. 18: 1-6]
2. Thus says the Lord: "Go and get a potter's earthen flask, and take some of the elders of the people and some of the elders of the priests... You shall break the flask in the sight of the men who go with you, and say to them, 'Thus says the Lord of hosts: "*Even so I will break this people and this city as one breaks a potter's vessel, which cannot be made whole again*"' [Jer. 19: 1, 10, 11]

According to a recent news release for the period, October 1, 2005- June 3, 2006, by the U.S. Department of Defense [No. 653-06 of July 10, 2006], there were 5,640 army reserve forces available as against the military goal of 4, 661.¹ Reserve forces are defined (for our purpose) as "members of the Military Services who are not in active service but who are subject to call to active duty."² In other words, there are close to one thousand reserve forces that were ready to be called but were not. It is possible that some of them could be called in the future. It is also possible that they may never be called. The choice is in the hands of the military authorities. In the end, such reserves may wind up either as reserved or 'rejected.'

In today's lesson, God illustrates a similar principle by using clay in the hands of a potter to demonstrate what we are in His hand. Just as the military authorities decide who to recruit and when to do so, it is the potter's prerogative to decide what clay to use or to discard. Just as clay has no say in the matter, we also have no say when or how God will use us for His purpose. So, how are we sure that we are not waiting interminably or that we may not have actually been rejected? Let us find out from today's lesson.

¹ www.defenselink.mil/releases/2006/nr20060710-13413.html

² www.usmilitary.about.com/od/glossarytermsr/g/r5318.htm

1. Background: The story of the Potter's clay

The Lord asked the prophet Jeremiah to go to the potter's house and observe his work. When he got there, he met the potter "making something at the wheel" [Jer. 18: 1-2]. Jeremiah observed that the vessel was marred in the potter's hand and that he then made another vessel "as it seemed good to the potter to make" [v. 4]. What was the meaning of that? God explained it to the prophet as follows [vv. 6-10]:

*As the clay is in the potter's hand, so are you in My hand, O house of Israel! The instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to **pluck up**, to **pull down**, and to **destroy** it, if that nation against whom I have spoken turns from its evil, I will relent of the disaster that I thought to bring upon it. And the instant I speak concerning a nation and concerning a kingdom, to **build** and to **plant** it, if it does evil in My sight so that it does not obey My voice, then I will relent concerning the good which I said I would benefit it.*

Then God asked Jeremiah to take with him an earthen vessel (bottle or flask, apparently made by the potter that he had visited) and to go to the Valley of the Son of Hinnom by the Potsherd Gate, in the company of "the elders of the people and some of the elders of the priests" [Jer. 19: 1-2]. When they reached there, the Lord commanded Jeremiah to break the vessel in the presence of the elders. Then, God told Jeremiah that He would so break the people and their city "as one breaks the potter's vessel, which cannot be made whole again" [vv. 10, 11]. Why would He do that to His chosen people? It was "because they have stiffened their necks that they might not hear (His) words" [v. 15].

Let us pay attention to the bottom line of these two illustrations. In the first case, the main material used by the potter is clay. As far as we know, clay is a *processed* raw material. In other words, you obtain it after mixing water with red earth and thoroughly kneading it into sticky slimy mud, according to the potter's specifications. Therefore, *only clay that meets the potter's minimum standards will qualify to be considered in making vessels*. So, even if clay has no say as to when and how it should be used by the potter, it has to be available before it can even be selected!

In the second story, the illustration suggests that the vessel (representing the people of Israel) was broken because it was not good, that is, the people had refused to obey God's word. If the vessel is defective, it is either the material used (clay) or the workmanship is defective. Since God cannot be wrong, therefore, the fault lies with the clay! What kind of clay are you? Are you the type that God can use to "build and plant" [Jer. 18: 9], or to "pluck up," or "pull down," or "destroy" [v. 7]?

2. What kind of clay are you?

As suggested earlier, believers are like clay which has come from a specific soil and kneaded to the required texture for the potter's use. God's work is summarized in Christ's great commission to believers, namely, to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all things that He has commanded them [**Matt. 28: 19-20**]. The work can be carried out through the five-fold ministry of *apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors* and *teachers* [**Eph. 4: 11**]. Believers are clay in the hand of God for any of those callings.

Since many are called but few are chosen [**Matt. 20: 16**], it is not every piece of available clay that the potter actually uses. S(he) may pick a piece that is no longer suitable (from old stock, for example) in place of a much better one. S(he) may choose to discard existing stock and order fresh supplies. However, human beings are not just "neutral" clay in God's hands. They have the freewill to be or not to be under God's control. God will not force anybody to serve Him. But since He knows our end from the beginning, He may choose us to serve Him when we ourselves are not yet ready. At the same time, there may be many of us who are desirous to be chosen but have not yet been called. Consequently, at the time that we are available as clay in His hands, we are not all of the same texture!

In general, we can fall into the following categories of clay, among others:

a) *The Fence-sitter!*

There are some believers who are not forthcoming and are glad to be ignored when it comes to God's calling. They are merely churchgoers. They seek to be prayed for but not to pray for others. They rush to nominate others to assignments but refuse to be nominated. These are believers sitting on the fence that they did not build nor are ready to repair. They are insiders looking inside from the outside. They may be quite active in the rituals of their church but not in the work of God.

That attitude may in part be a reaction to how they have been treated by the past or present. For example, they may have been looked down on by virtue of their economic status, educational attainment, colour or gender. They may have come from another congregation which has just passed through a major political crisis in which their faction lost. They may be so active in other secular activities that they may not have the time or the interest to do God's work. It may also be their natural inclination to be *passive* and to get involved as peripherally as possible.

However, God is not going to use the lukewarm believer as clay because, if you are neither hot nor cold, He will vomit you out of His mouth [**Rev. 3: 15, 16**].

b) *The Reluctant Recruit*

There are some believers who do not want or like limelight but God brings them out to be used as labourers in His vineyard. They are not looking for it and they are not interested. These are reluctant recruits who behave as *conscripts*. For example, Moses was a fugitive from Egyptian justice when God called him to bring the people of Israel out of Egypt. He was not looking for that job and he did not want it. See how many excuses he gave to avoid going [**Ex. 3: 11; 4: 10**]! Jonah bought a one-way ticket in the wrong direction rather than accept God's call to go and preach repentance to Nineveh [**Jon. 1: 3**]!

Among reluctant recruits, you get the sense that they may not fully value or appreciate their calling. In the end, they may disappoint. Take the case of Saul who was searching for his father's lost asses when he was instead anointed the first king of Israel. When he went looking for a prophet and he was referred to Samuel, all he wanted to know was where to get the lost animals [**1 Sam. 9: 1-27**]. See the cavalier way that he treated his calling. He disobeyed God in almost everything that he was commanded to do and God stripped him of his kingship and gave it to David, a man after God's own heart [**1 Sam. 16: 1**]. See how many Catholic priests renounce their vow of celibacy and get married. Why did they wait to take a vow before realizing that they were not cut out for celibacy?

c) *The Willing Horse*

This type of believer is willing and ready! That is the willing horse. When God spoke with Job, He described the horse as follows [**Job 39: 19-25**]:

Have you given the horse strength? ...Can you frighten him like a locust? ... He mocks at fear, and is not frightened; nor does he turn back from the sword... He devours the distance with fierceness and rage; nor does he come to a halt because the trumpet has sounded. ... He smells the battle from afar

In like manner, this type of believer is God's favourite clay. For example, when Archangel Gabriel came to a teenage virgin called Mary and explained to her how she was going to become the mother of Jesus without knowing a man, she responded, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word" [**Lk 1: 26-38**]. She was willing and enthusiastic about it! That is choice clay in God's hand.

d) *The Dutiful Waiter*

The majority of us fall into the category that desires to be used but has not yet been chosen. We are anxious to be in active service. We have already received a firm word (by prophecy, for example) that the Lord will choose us for a specific assignment. Yet, years and years later, nothing has happened, and we are getting worried. We then try to do God's work for Him! For example, some people go on foreign missions (to acquire "field experience" for their future work) to which God has not sent them and run into unanticipated problems there. Why do you want to fly before growing wings?

A good example of dutiful waiting was demonstrated by Matthias, one of the disciples of Jesus. When the Lord selected the twelve apostles, Matthias was not one of them. In his place, a thief like Judas Iscariot, a tax collector like Matthew and others were preferred [**Matt. 10: 1-4**]. Rather than walk away like some disciples who found walking with the Christ so hard [**Jn 6: 66**], Matthias stayed on and was there when Jesus ascended to Heaven. But his patience paid off when the apostles wanted to replace Judas Iscariot who had committed suicide for betraying Jesus. After the apostles had prayed, they chose two disciples on account of their "hearts." They then cast their lots which fell on Matthias "and he was numbered with the eleven apostles" [**Acts 1: 15-26**]. He was a dutiful waiter; *he waited until he was chosen*.

The dutiful waiter is the type of clay addressed in today's lesson. God's command is that you wait for His timing. That makes you the clay with which God will build and plant [**Jer. 18: 9**] a durable earthen vessel. However, when you refuse to wait, you are likely to do things that amount to sin. That is the point made through the prophet Isaiah when God told the people of Israel, "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength," but the people would not. Instead they preferred to flee and ride on swift horses. Therefore, those pursuing them would be swifter [**Is. 30: 15-16**]. So, to refuse to wait is to be like the broken earthen vessel that symbolizes those who "have stiffened their necks" so as not to hear God's words [**Jer. 19: 15**]. While God reserves and preserves the dutiful waiters for their best use ahead, He rejects the swift runners. The reserved, He will plant and build up; the rejected, He will pluck up and destroy [**Jer. 18: 7, 9**].

3. Conclusion: It is better to wait than be rejected!

Here are the winning tips to be a good waiter:

- Be customer-oriented!

Good waiters focus on the customers and their satisfaction. They do not take orders until the customers are ready. They cannot force customers to hurry up their food or drinks! In like manner, the dutiful waiter before God must focus on His satisfaction and plan. S(he) must walk by faith and not by sight because without faith, nobody can please God.

- See service as a duty!

Good waiters are not so much as concerned with their own comfort. They smile even when they are hurting. They do not expect any reward from customers because they will be paid by their employers. Therefore, the service that they render is their thankless duty. In like manner, God loves more those who serve Him because of who He is rather than what they will get from Him. Do not be a con artist, trying to manipulate God because He knows your aim even before you think of it!

- A hefty tip comes in the end!

Most customers know the tip-hunters among waiters and would hardly give them beyond the traditional tip (10% in many countries). But the really good waitresses get much more than they have bargained for. Take the case of the waitress in the movie, *It could happen to you* (1994). A customer (a police officer) only had enough money to pay for his cup of coffee but nothing for tip for the nice waitress. She told him not to bother about paying for the coffee too, that it was on her account. So, in appreciation of good service and her kind nature, he promised to share half of his lottery winnings with her as her tip, should he win. The following day, he won US\$4 million and he gave her half of it. And do you know what? She had been legally declared bankrupt a few days earlier for inability to pay a credit card debt of \$10,000 incurred by her estranged husband! In like manner, God doubles the earthly blessings of dutiful servants and grants them eternal life in heaven after their death [Matt. 19: 29].

Even after you have waited for so long and nothing happens, *still wait*. When you *truly* wait for God, He will *never* reject you. Even so, remember that the stone which the builders rejected became the chief cornerstone in the person of Jesus Christ. That was the Lord's doing and it was marvelous in our eyes [Ps. 118: 22, 23; Lk 20: 17-18]! So are you when you accept to be choice clay in God's hand.