

OKOTOKS EVANGELICAL FREE CHURCH

DOES GOD PLAY FAVORITES?

GOD CREATES FOR HIS PURPOSES (ROM. 9:19-21)

MAY 22-28, 2016



MAIN POINT

God places His purpose upon our lives and we have a choice how we will respond to that responsibility.

THINKING THINGS THROUGH

Connect the sermon to the study.

1. Have you ever worked with clay, either with your children or in an art class? How good were you at working with this material?
2. What is a skilled artisan able to do with clay that most of us will never be able to do? What effect does the ability of the artisan have on the end product?

Leader: Working with ceramics and pottery is a skill that very few people today have mastered, but in ancient Israel, pottery and earthen ware vessels were a necessary part of life. People would train to acquire this skill and use it to make a living. While most of us wouldn't know how to make heads or tails of a lump of clay, a skilled potter is not limited like we are. To the potter, the lump of clay bends to his will. In Romans 9, Paul referenced an Old Testament illustration of a potter at work to explain how God creates us for His purposes but allows us to choose how we will respond to that responsibility.

DIGGING DEEPER

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

Leader: In the following section of the Book of Jeremiah, God used the potter as an illustration of how He molds His creation for His use.

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JEREMIAH 18:1-4.

3. Before Jeremiah spoke, he watched the potter work. How do you stop and observe what God is doing around you? What do we miss about God when we don't pause to observe Him at work?
4. Verse 4 provides the most important point of this illustration. What was the potter able to see about the clay? What was he able to do about it?

Leader: When Jeremiah went down to the potter's house upon God's instruction, he spent time watching the potter work with his clay. As the potter worked, the clay was not conforming to the plans the potter had for it.

So, the potter took the same lump of clay and changed his plans for it. God helped Jeremiah understand this imagery reflected His relationship with the people of Israel. They rebelled against God's plans for their nation, but despite their disobedience, God was still sovereign (meaning all things are under His rule and control) over the end result. He still used the nation of Israel to bring a Savior for all people. Just as the potter saw a desired outcome and was able to bend the marred clay to his will, so is God able to do in our lives, even when it means He changes His mind.

5. Can you share an example of a time when God corrected something in your life that you didn't see as a problem?

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JEREMIAH 18:5-6.

6. In this illustration, the potter represents God and the clay represents God's people, specifically Israel and then more broadly us today. What is the potter able to do with the clay? What truth did Jeremiah learn about God's purposes from this illustration?

7. It is important for us to understand that God's sovereign control does not eliminate our responsibility to live according to His purposes. What does God do when we live outside His purpose?

Leader: After the illustration God posed a question to Jeremiah that Paul posed in his letter to the Romans: Is God not able to do as He pleases? Psalm 115:3 says, "Our God is in heaven; He does whatever pleases Him." The ultimate determining factor in history is the will of God, but yet human beings make real choices. The Bible holds the sovereignty of God and responsibility of men side by side. Rather than allow these two parallel truths to confuse us, they should inspire confidence in the God we serve. He controls all things, and He cares enough about us to step in when we don't live into His purposes. However, we should also see this truth as a warning: We are subject to God. The Lord sees all we do, and He expects us to honor Him and His purposes in our lives.

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ JEREMIAH 18:7-10.

8. When you observe the world around you, are you tempted to lose hope?

9. How does God's control of the nations bother you and how does it comfort you?

10. In God's use of Israel, God used people and a nation to bring a Savior for all people (a purpose Paul made clear in Romans 9). What part do we (as individuals and as the church) continue to play in that plan? How are you responding to that responsibility?

Leader: God is able to accomplish all that He purposes; His sovereignty ensures it. We all fit into God's plan to bring a Savior to all people, and we should desire to be molded for His use in this way. As part of God's church

SERMON BASED GROWTH GROUP

today, God molds us to be His mouthpiece, responsible for telling others the good news about Jesus. We either accept and obey that responsibility, or we live in disobedience to it.

DOING LIFE TOGETHER

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

11. How do you feel you are doing as you seek to live in a way that embraces God's purposes for your life? Is there anything you need to change immediately? How will you honor God with your choices this week or as you go into your summer?

12. How do we help and encourage one another as a Growth Group to continually keep our hearts aligned with God's purpose for our lives? What can we do to continue this even after our groups wrap up next week?

PRAYER

Praise God for His sovereignty. Worship Him for not being subject to anyone or anything, but for being gracious and kind enough to provide a way for us to be accepted when we have sinned against Him. Pray that God's sovereignty would cause us to recognize our responsibility before Him.

MEMORIZE

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. –Jeremiah 18:4

SPOTLIGHT ON THE PASSAGE

JEREMIAH 18:1-10

18:1-4. Chapter 18 opens with a third-person account of God’s Word coming to Jeremiah. Beginning with verse 2, the account is written in the first person; the prophet told the story in his own words. The expressions Go down (v. 2) and went down (v. 3) suggest that Jeremiah went to a lower part of the city, perhaps a valley. Many interpreters believe the incident took place somewhere near the Valley of Hinnom.

Jeremiah had probably seen a potter at work many times before the day recorded in this chapter. Either at this particular place or one like it, the prophet had often observed the skill and dexterity of the artisan. The potter produced various vessels for different uses to enrich the life of Israel’s citizenry. Perhaps never before had Jeremiah been in such a contemplative mood observing a potter at work as on this particular day. He was deeply concerned about the nation’s spiritual plight. He was ready to hear God’s object lesson.

Most interpreters agree that verse 4 contains the heart of this story. We find in it two great truths. First, as the potter worked the product was disfigured. Second, the potter changed his purpose or direction and produced something other than what he had originally planned. This story, of all Jeremiah’s “acted out parables,” has appealed to many subsequent writers. Paul’s letter to the Romans uses it to illustrate spiritual truths.

One who interprets a parable must remember the nature of this literary device. It is not an allegory where every part has an application. He should look for the one essential truth the speaker or writer meant to convey. In this event Yahweh meant to reveal one supreme fact to Jeremiah that he was to pass on to the people. The work of Yahweh for Israel had been marred. He had meant for the nation to be a great theocracy, but this had not happened. The chosen people had refused to be faithful to the covenant they made with Yahweh at Sinai.

God must work in a different way to accomplish his redemptive purposes. He would not cast off his people entirely, but they must face chastisement and correction. Israel must regroup and reexamine her concept of God’s nature. Crushed into shapelessness by the potter’s hand, the clay was placed once more on the whirling wheel. Though broken and marred it could still be used. Likewise, reshaped to a new design, Israel would still be molded into a useful servant, as seemed best to the Potter.

18:5-6. Jeremiah added the words in verse 5 to assure his audience that the truths that followed were just as reliable as those coming after verse 1. He was as certain that Yahweh had spoken to him now as he was when God had told him to go to the potter’s house. What was this message? Israel belonged to Yahweh in a very special way. He had called Abraham from Ur of the Chaldees to inaugurate a new era in the history of his dealing with the nations. Punishment of the sinful world by a flood had not changed human nature. People needed more than punishment. They needed redemption and the inward change that comes when one meets Yahweh and comes into a personal relationship with him. Through the seed of Abraham, God would bless the world.

Several centuries passed before Yahweh’s chosen agent was ready to become active in this redemption process. Abraham’s descendants spent four centuries in Egypt, much of the time as slaves. But under Moses, God redeemed his chosen people, gave them national identification, and made a covenant with them. Though Israel had broken the covenant, Yahweh had not cast her off. She was still his agent to implement his plan. He had his hand on Israel in a special way. As the clay was subject to the potter, so Israel was subject to him.

18:7-10. Jeremiah was a prophet who covered all the bases when he spoke God’s will. He had made clear that God was in charge and would never relinquish his sovereignty. But he needed to point out the flip side of this coin. His message was no inflexible pronouncement of a rigid determinism that ignored human personality. Neither was God a deity who was enslaved by his previous decrees. Both he and his creatures have choices.

Unfortunately many Christians stumble on this paradox in God’s nature. They cannot bridge the gap between two great theological truths—God’s foreknowledge and our free will. A few oversimplify the matter of God’s foreknowledge with the statement, “What is to be will be.” This attitude is as far from reality as the opposite mind-set that denies God’s omniscience, or knowledge of everything.