

96-11-10b

Okay, we're back from our break and we're ready now to address the subject of the potter and the clay. If our understanding of Romans is accurate, if our understanding of what Paul is saying in chapter 9 is accurate, this should be borne out in any study that we do of the terms and phrases that he uses in this chapter. So when he talks about God being like the potter, shaping the clay, we need to see what Scripture has to say about that.

I'd like to begin by going to Isaiah. Isaiah chapter 29, verse 13. Isaiah 29, verse 13.

I paraphrased a little earlier this morning. The Lord says, Once again, notice the questioning of the disobedient believers in Israel saying that God is not aware. And he says in verse 16, This is the implication of the question that Paul gives rhetorically in Romans 9. You will say to me, O man, why does he yet find fault? Who has resisted his will? The implication of that question is God doesn't know what he's talking about.

If he's making me into a vessel of wrath and fitting me for destruction, he's wrong. I haven't resisted his will. God's making a mistake if he's fitting Israel for discipline, which is the subject in chapter 9. You recall that Paul began the chapter by saying that he's grieved and sorrowful over Israel because they have all of the advantages.

They have all of the things that belong to the people of God. And it's not that the Word of God has failed. There's a basis why Israel is being set aside and the Gentiles are receiving a greater portion of God's blessing than even the believing Israelites.

There's a reason for that. That's the argument in Romans chapter 9. Why does it appear as though the people of God, Israel, have been set aside in the church age? And they're not in the prominent place of God's plan. They're not the ones by whom God fulfills his purpose and reflects his glory in the church age.

Why has Israel been set aside? Paul says it's not that the Word of God has failed. There's a basis for God choosing. Look at Jacob and Esau.

Look at Isaac and Ishmael. Look at the potter and the clay. Now, who is he talking about here in Isaiah chapter 29? These people who draw near with their mouths and honor me with their lips, but have removed their heart far from me.

This is the classic Israelite believer in the Old Testament. And unfortunately, it was the classic Israelite believer in the New Testament. In the early days of the church, the Jewish church had this problem.

We have seen in some of our previous studies, do you remember the difficulty that Paul had with James? The difficulty that Peter had with James, who was the leader of the church in Jerusalem,

the entirely Jewish church? And what happened? James led Peter astray, didn't he? Into works. Peter got with the men from James, and then he didn't want to eat with the Gentiles anymore. Paul got tangled up with James and wound up taking the offering and taking the vow at the temple in Jerusalem.

James, the leader of the Jerusalem church, represents and embodies the thinking of the Jerusalem church, the Jewish church, and they were still oriented to works. They couldn't quite get away from the law, and they subverted others. They caused Peter to stumble, and they caused Paul to stumble in the New Testament.

That's the difficulty in Israel, and it goes all the way back here to Isaiah. They draw near with their mouths, they honor me with their lips, but they have removed their hearts far from me. Who is it that moved the hearts? God or the people? We have a lot of talk about God hardening hearts and so forth.

They have removed their hearts far from me. God doesn't say, I have hardened their hearts. They have removed their hearts.

I will do a marvelous work among this people. The wisdom of their wives shall perish. The prudent will be hidden.

Woe to those who seek to hide their counsel. And verse 16 is the pertinent verse here. You have things turned around.

Don't look at the potter as though he were like the clay. Shall the thing made say of him who made it, he did not make me, or shall the thing formed say of him who formed it, he has no understanding. Why does he yet find fault? Who of us has resisted his will? That's the idea.

Turn over in the next chapter here to Isaiah chapter 30 and verse 9. God continues his condemnation of the believers in Israel. This is a rebellious people, lying children. Children who will not hear the law of the Lord.

He doesn't say children who won't have faith in God or believe in God for salvation. They won't hear the law. The law is the system of life for believers.

They are disobedient, rebellious children. Who say to the seers, the communicators of truth, do not see, and to the prophets, do not prophesy to us right things. Speak to us smooth things.

Prophecy deceits. Get out of the way. Turn aside from the path.

Cause the Holy One of Israel to cease from before us. Therefore, thus says the Holy One of Israel, because you despise this Word and trust in oppression and perversity and rely on them. Now I will just comment here that this is what is happening in the church today.

Instead of relying on the Word of God and the teaching of the Word of God to rebuke and correct and instruct, we rely on oppression. We rely on perversity. That's what small group accountability is all about.

To keep you from falling in the moral arena, as a man, we're going to have a little get together once a week and we're going to make each other accountable and we're going to ask hard questions. Have you been thinking evil thoughts about your secretary and so forth? And this accountability, this peer pressure, is the oppression by which we try to make people obedient in the external sense, rather than concentrating each believer individually, as under the Lord, on the teaching of the Word of God and learning the Word of God and putting faith in the Word of God for righteousness and for power over whatever the desires of the world, the flesh, and the devil may be. We rely on oppression and perversity.

This is what the Pharisees did in Jesus' day, isn't it? They oppressed the people for righteousness. They browbeat them and tried to pressure them into giving and so forth. Look at verse 13 of Isaiah 30.

Therefore this iniquity shall be to you like a breach ready to fall, a bulge in a high wall whose breaking comes suddenly in an instant. And he shall break it like the breaking of the potter's vessel, which is broken in pieces. He shall not spare, so that there shall not be found among its fragments a shard to take fire from the hearth or to take water from the cistern.

These believers are going to be shattered like pottery and shattered into pieces so small that you can't even use one to scoop a coal out of the fire or scoop a sip of water out of the well. That's how great the discipline from God is going to be on the people of God who disregard His Word. Turn over a few pages in Isaiah to chapter 41, verse 21.

Isaiah 41, 21. Present your case, says the Lord. He's talking again to Israel, to believers in Israel.

Bring forth your strong reasons, says the King of Jacob. Let them bring forth and show us what will happen. He's talking about the idols that the Israelites have turned to.

These are believers and yet they have fallen away from God and the worship of God and they have embraced idol worship or tolerated idol worship. Let them, these idols, bring forth and show us what will happen. Let them show the former things, what they were, that we may consider them and know the latter end of them or declare to us the things to come.

We've seen in the past, this is one of the ways that God distinguishes Himself from any other proposed God. What other God is there that tells you what's going to happen before it happens? That's God's unique power as the God of the universe to know ahead of time what will happen. So He says, bring up the idols, see if they can do that.

Show the things that are to come hereafter, in verse 23, that we may know that you are gods.

Yes, do good or do evil that we may be dismayed and see it together. Bless or curse so that we can see your power and the might of your name.

This is God's claim in the Old Testament and in the New, isn't it? For this reason I have raised you up to show forth my power and my name. I bless and I curse. I have mercy and I harden.

That's what distinguishes God as God. He says, see if there's any idol that can do that, can bless and curse. Indeed you are nothing and your work is nothing.

He who chooses you is an abomination. I have raised one up from the north and he shall come from the rising of the sun. He shall call on my name.

He shall come against the princes as though they were mortar, as the potter treads clay. Who has declared from the beginning that we may know and former times that we may say he is righteous? Surely there is no one who shows. There is no one who declares.

There is no one who hears your words. The first time I said to Zion, look, there they are and I will give to Jerusalem one who brings good tidings. I looked and there was no man.

I looked among them and there was no counselor who when I asked of them could answer a word. Indeed they are all worthless. Their works are nothing.

Their molded images are wind and confusion. So once again God uses the imagery of shattering pottery to talk about discipline on those who rebel against him and turn away from him and set up something else to be their priority, something else to be their God. A few pages over in Isaiah.

Isaiah, as you may start to notice here, is probably what Paul had in mind when he used that phrase in Romans 9. Isaiah 45, verse 6. Isaiah 45, verse 6. Chapter 45 of Isaiah talks about Cyrus, the king who will come and has been commissioned by God. He says in Isaiah 45, 5, I am the Lord and there is no other. There is no God besides me.

I will gird you though you have not known me, that they may know from the rising of the sun to its setting that there is none beside me. Once again, God is going to ensure that his power and his name are declared and he's going to use Cyrus to do it. I form the light and create darkness.

I make peace and create calamity, it says here in the New King James. And that word for calamity is evil. And people have gone and said, see God is the author of evil.

The Hebrew word for evil, the worst kind of evil there is. But it's a synonym for calamity. It doesn't mean that God is the author of sin or that God creates evil.

This is talking about consequences. God can bless or God can discipline. God can create and God can destroy.

And there's a basis for it. There's a reason for it. And this is a good translation.

I make peace. I create calamity. I the Lord do all these things.

Rain down you heavens from above and let the skies pour down righteousness. Let the earth open. Let them bring forth salvation.

And let righteousness spring up together. I the Lord have created it. And look at verse 9. Woe to him who strives with his maker.

Let the potsherds strive with the potsherds of the earth. Shall the clay say to him who forms it, What are you making? Or shall your handiwork say, He has no hands? Woe to him who says to his father, What are you begetting? Or to the woman, What have you brought forth? Thus says the Lord, the Holy One of Israel and His Maker, Ask me of things to come concerning my sons and concerning the work of my hands. You command me.

Now the whole point is here, he's still talking about Israel. He's talking about his sons, the work of his hands. And he's going to discipline them.

And he says, Don't question what I'm doing with you. I'm the potter. You're the clay.

I know everything about you. And I know why I'm doing what I'm doing with you. And there's a reason for it.

And if you read Isaiah, Isaiah is one long case against Israel for disobedience. It explains the reason for their bondage and their going out of the land and so forth. And this is again in Paul's mind.

Shall the clay say to him who formed it, What are you making? Why are you making me this way? You have no right to question the potter. Now this is not the Persians that are saying, Why didn't you make us Israelites and why didn't you save us? This is Israel saying, Why are you disciplining us? Why are we in bondage? And that's the people of God experiencing the discipline of God because of disobedience to God. Right? So far, every single reference we've had to the potter, to the clay, to pot sherds have all been with regard to discipline on the people of God, haven't they? Isaiah 64 This is a great chapter.

One of the first verses I ever memorized out of the Old Testament was Isaiah 64, 6. The prophet says, Oh, that you would rend the heavens, that you would come down, that the mountains might shake at your presence as fire burns brushwood, as fire causes water to boil, to make your name known to your adversaries. What is the purpose of God in choosing? If you go back here in a week or a month and look at Romans 9, and he says, so that God's purpose according to election might stand, God's purpose in choosing might stand when He says the elder will serve the younger. Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated.

What is the purpose of God in choosing? It is to make His name known, to display His power and

His glory. That's why God chooses some for blessing and some for discipline. That the nations may tremble at your presence.

When you did awesome things for which we did not look, you came down and the mountains shook at your presence. Since the beginning of the world, men have not heard nor perceived by the ear, nor has the eye seen any God besides you who acts for the one who waits for Him. That's the basis of the choice.

God acts on behalf of the one who waits for Him in verse 4 of Isaiah 64. You meet Him who rejoices and does righteousness, who remembers you in your ways. You are indeed angry for we have sinned and in these ways we continue and we need to be delivered.

Now this we are the believers in Israel. They are sinning. They are being disobedient.

They are not waiting for God. They are not rejoicing and doing righteousness. And notice none of these things are the basis for salvation.

We don't do righteousness. We don't wait for the Lord and we don't rejoice in the Lord to get saved. These are living righteousness.

We are all like an unclean thing and all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags. We all fade as a leaf and our iniquities like the wind have taken us away. And there is no one who calls on your name, who stirs himself up to take hold of you.

For you have hidden your face from us and have consumed us because of our iniquities. This is discipline on believers for disobedience. But now, O Lord, You are our Father.

This is the same us, the same we that He's been talking about all through Isaiah 64. Now, O Lord, You are our Father. These are the people of God, the children of God.

We are the clay and You are our potter and we are all the work of Your hand. Do not be furious, O Lord, nor remember iniquity forever. Indeed, please look, we are all Your people.

If there was any doubt in anyone's mind as to what's being discussed here, this should clear it up. These are the people of God. Your holy cities are a wilderness.

Zion is a wilderness. Jerusalem is a desolation. These words, by the way, in Hebrew are synonymous with Apollia and in some cases are translated Apollia in the Septuagint.

Ruin, waste, oblivion. Our holy and beautiful temple where our fathers praised You is burnt up with fire and all our pleasant things are laid waste. Discipline on believers.

Believers, their cities, their dwellings, their lives made ruin because of their attitude toward their God in Isaiah 64. And once again, He is the potter, they are the clay, they are the work of His

hand. You begin to see a pattern here, don't we? And the Old Testament is so replete with the promise of discipline and even destruction on believers who disregard God.

You can just make note of this, we won't read it, but you can look at this in Isaiah chapter 65. You can keep going on in that chapter. And the theme of Isaiah 65 is because Israel is the people of God have been so disobedient and have been made into a vessel fitted for destruction, that something is going to happen.

And Isaiah 65 is very important because what does it talk about? I was sought by those who did not ask for me. I was found by those who did not seek me. I said, here I am, here I am, to a nation that was not called by my name.

This foreshadows the church age. This foreshadows the opportunity to be used by God to fulfill His purpose and be the forefront of His plan by the Gentiles. Because Israel, as the people of God, not in terms of salvation, but in terms of these things that God wants to do with His people, have failed so miserably.

God is going to open this opportunity up to the Gentiles. And that's what Isaiah 65 talks about. But when you read that chapter, this is exactly what Paul is referencing in Romans 9. Paul is talking in Romans 9 to these people who persist in acting like the Old Testament Israel.

And he says, you're Christians, but because you're doing the same thing that believers in the Old Testament did, look, God is going to work through the Gentiles. If you want to understand why God has cast off His people, it's because His people are disobedient. They have established a pattern over the centuries of being apathetic and unwilling to pursue the plan of God of righteousness through faith.

So God's going to do a new thing in the church age. He's going to open it up to the nations, to the Gentiles. He says in verse 2 of Isaiah 65, I have stretched out my hands all day long to a rebellious people who walk in a way that is not good according to their own thoughts, a people who provoke me to anger continually to my face, who sacrifice in gardens, burn incense on altars of brick, sit among the graves and spend the night in the tombs, they eat swine's flesh and the broth of abominable things in their vessels, who say, keep to yourself, do not come near me, for I am holier than you.

They are a smoke in my nostril, a fire that burns all the day. These people say, we're holy. Why does He find fault? Who's resisted His will? And yet they're a smoke in God's nose and a stench in His nostrils.

Behold, it is written before me, I will not keep silence, I will repay. I will even repay into their bosom your iniquities and the iniquities of your fathers together, says the Lord. So this is discipline on the people of God for disobedience.

Jeremiah. Isaiah and Jeremiah both emphasize this point to Israel. Look at Jeremiah 16.10. Jeremiah 16.10. It shall be when you show this people all these words, and they say to you, why has the Lord pronounced all this great disaster against us? What is our iniquity? What is our sin that we have committed against the Lord our God? What an echo of the rhetorical question Paul gives us in Romans 9. Why has the Lord pronounced this great disaster against us? What is our iniquity? What is our sin that we have committed against the Lord God? Then, in Jeremiah 16.11, then you shall say to them, because your fathers have forsaken me, says the Lord, they have walked after other gods and have served them and worshipped them and have forsaken me and not kept my law.

Once again, I will remind you, law keeping is not a means of salvation. It is a means of pleasing God as a believer. And they haven't done that.

And you have done worse than your fathers. For behold, each one follows the dictates of his own evil heart, so that no one listens to me. Therefore, I will cast you out of this land.

This happened in time, and it's going to happen in the Millennial Kingdom. Disobedient Old Testament believers, part of their loss of reward in the Millennial Kingdom is that they won't live in the land. They're going to live in Australia, and they're going to live in China, and they're going to live in Tibet and in Russia and who knows where on the face of the earth.

But, sons of Abraham, Old Testament believers who fell into this category will miss living in the land. It's part of the loss for disobedience. I will cast you out of this land into a land that you do not know, neither you nor your fathers.

And there you shall serve other gods day and night where I will not show you favor. And that's a synonym for I will hate you. It's synonymous.

I can't bless you. I can't favor you. I can't give you the benefits of your sonship.

I can't give you the benefits of heirship because you're rebellious. Therefore, behold, the days are coming, says the Lord. It shall no more be said the Lord lives who brought up the children of Israel from the land of Egypt, but the Lord lives who brought up the children from all the lands where He had driven them.

God is going to be notorious. God is going to be known in the earth. His name and His power are going to be notorious through all the earth.

For what? For driving the Israelites into all of the nations outside the land. God is going to be glorified either in blessing us or in disciplining us. But His power and His name, that's the point.

That's why He chooses some for mercy and some for discipline. Either way, God is going to be glorified. He drives them there.

That's the discipline. I will bring them back into their land which I gave to their fathers. That regathering is the mercy and the compassion that God will show.

And those who will live in the land are those who respond and who listen and who wait for the Lord. You can see this in Jeremiah 18, verse 1. This was our Scripture reading this morning. Remember when He goes to the potter's house? He went down to the potter's house and He was making something at the wheel.

The vessel that He made was marred in the hands of the potter. What happened there? The clay failed. The clay did not hold up.

The clay was not faithful to the shape that the potter was trying to give it. And He had to make a different kind of vessel. That's the imagery that we have in Romans 9. But who is the clay in Jeremiah 18? Is it the human race? Some for salvation and some for destruction in the lake of fire? Not at all.

Look at verse 6. O house of Israel, can I not do with you as this potter? The clay is the house of Israel. It's the people of God. It's believers.

If the clay holds up, it becomes a vessel of honor. If it mars in the hand of the potter, He has to make something else out of it and it's discipline. Turn over a chapter in Jeremiah to 19, verse 1. 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.

These are the leadership in Israel. These are the people responsible to God for the children of God, for their spiritual leadership and so forth. Look at verse 2. Go out to the valley of the son of Hinnom, which is by the entry of the potsherd gate.

Notice the association here with the potter and the clay, the potsherds, the potsherd gate. God is telling them something even with the location of the delivery of this oracle. And what does He say in verse 4? They have forsaken Me.

They have made this an alien place. They have burned incense to other gods. Neither they, their fathers, nor the kings of Judah have known.

They have filled this place with the blood of the innocents, and so on. Look at verse 6. Therefore, behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, that this place shall no more be called Topheth or the valley of the son of Hinnom, but the valley of slaughter. And I will make void the council of Judah and Jerusalem in this place, and I will cause them to fall by the sword before their enemies and by the hands of those who seek their lives.

Their corpses I will give as meat for the birds of heaven and for the beasts of the earth. I will make this city desolate and a hissing. Everyone who passes by it will be astonished and hiss because of all its plagues.

This is discipline on the people of God, and it's severe. It's harsh. I will cause them to eat the flesh of their sons and the flesh of their daughters, and so forth.

Look at verse 10. Then 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, and they shall bury them in Tophet till there is no place to bury. This is the severity and the harshness of God's discipline on His people.

God's not doing this to Nineveh. He's not doing it to Assyria. He's doing it to Jerusalem, and He is giving this message to the leadership, the elders of the people and the elders of the priests.

This is a message for believers about how harsh God's discipline can be. This is ruin. This is desolation.

This is being broken so fine that your pieces are even useless. Turn over a few pages to another book that Jeremiah wrote, Lamentations 4, verse 1. How the gold has become dim. How changed is the fine gold.

The stones of the sanctuary are scattered at the head of every street. The precious sons of Zion, valuable as fine gold, how they are regarded as clay pots, the work of the hands of the potter. Even the jackals present their breasts to nurse their young, but the daughter of my people is cruel like ostriches in the wilderness.

And he goes on to condemn the daughters of my people, believers, and talks about the severity. Lamentations, of course, is the book of lament for the discipline on the people of God. Do you begin to see the pattern here of what the potter and the clay represents in the Old Testament? You can't get around it.

It is never used of the nations. It's never used of unbelievers or pagans. It's always used of God's severe, harsh discipline on His people for their failure to listen, their failure to wait, their failure to obey.

Always, without exception, any place you want to look, do a concordance study on it. Well, what does this mean to us? Turn to 2 Timothy 2, verse 14. Once again, we have Paul speaking and once again, he is going to talk about vessels of honor and dishonor.

2 Timothy 2, verse 14. This is a pastoral epistle. This is the Apostle Paul training a pastor and telling him what he should do in the church, right? He's just given the faithful saying, if we die with Him, we shall live with Him.

If we endure, we shall reign. Notice, not if we have faith, we will reign. Not if we're believers, we will reign.

If we endure, it's part of the eternal life package, part of the inheritance package to rule with Christ and it requires endurance. Salvation does not depend on endurance, but inheritance and reward in the kingdom does depend on endurance. If we are faithless, He remains faithful.

He cannot deny Himself. We will still be saved. We'll still be there, but we will lose reward.

Remind them of these things. That's what we're doing this morning, isn't it? We're letting Scripture remind us of these things. Charging them before the Lord not to strive about words to no profit to the ruin of the hearers.

Be diligent to present yourself approved to God. How many times have we heard that verse? Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed. There are some who are not diligent and will be ashamed, who do not rightly divide the word of truth as we're encouraged to do here.

Shun profane and idle babblings, for they will increase to more ungodliness. Their message will spread like cancer. Hymenaeus and Philetus are of this sort who have strayed concerning the truth, saying that the resurrection has already passed.

This is doctrinal error. This is lack of attention to the Word of God. Not being a careful student.

Not rightly dividing the word of truth. And they overthrow the faith of some. You can't overthrow saving faith, but you can overthrow living faith.

Nevertheless, the solid foundation of God stands having this seal. The Lord knows those who are His. And if you go back to Numbers 16.5, you know what the context of that quote is? It's the Korah rebellion.

It's when they stood up and said, why do Moses and Aaron get to be the priests and the leaders in Israel? We're all declared to be holy. God has said we're all holy, so why can't we function in the same way that the Levitical priests do? And Moses says, God knows the ones that are His. You come and show up with your censer in the morning and God will show who's His and who's not.

Korah is a believer. Korah came out of Egypt under the blood of the Passover lamb. Korah is going to get swallowed up by the earth that next day because he disregards the word of God and the plan of God in designating the function of the Levites.

Korah is a Levite, but he's not a priest and he wants to be a priest. He wants to do something that God hasn't authorized him to do. It's not a salvation issue.

It's a living righteousness issue. And when God says He knows those who are His, He knows the faithful among His children, those who are truly His, those who are sons indeed. Let everyone who names the name of Christ depart from iniquity.

It's not just naming the name of Christ. If you're going to be a faithful son, then depart from iniquity and do good. Be diligent to show yourself approved.

Now look at verse 20. In a great house, there are not only vessels of gold and silver, but also of wood and clay. Where do clay vessels come from? They come from the potter's wheel, don't they? There are gold and silver vessels and some of them are wood and clay.

Some for honor and some for dishonor. Some are chalices that sit on the great well-set banquet table and others are wash pots and pots that you keep under the bed at night and so forth. Some for honor and some for dishonor.

Notice something. All of these vessels are in the household, aren't they? They are all used by the master of the house. They all serve a function.

But some of them serve an honorable function and some of them a dishonorable function. But either way, the master of the house is served, right? These are not vessels outside the house. Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from the latter, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified and useful for the master, prepared for every good work.

We decide what kind of vessel we are going to be. It is not that God arbitrarily in the inscrutability of His unknowable wisdom chooses some of us for honor and some of us for dishonor in a capricious and utterly unknowable way. We decide if we cleanse ourselves, if we depart from iniquity, if we are diligent to show ourselves approved to God, look at the context of this.

It's believers making a choice about living righteousness, about the righteousness of faith that Abraham demonstrated in Romans 4. It's the thrust of the book of Romans. It's the thrust of the New Testament. It's the thrust of the Bible.

It's the point of the plan of God. God has a purpose in choosing. And it is not from the source of us or from the source of our choosing that blessing comes or that salvation comes or that anything comes.

God magnifies His name. God demonstrates His power and His purpose in choosing to honor those who honor Him. And when He does that, He is glorified.

He is magnified. His name and His reputation are displayed in the earth. If we want to be good witnesses for Jesus Christ, it's not a matter of trying to go out and make it happen simply through works.

It's a matter of becoming a vessel of honor. That's how God's power and name are displayed, through the vessels of honor. And it takes a lot more than handing out a tract or giving the Roman road in a ten-minute presentation to someone.

It takes living righteousness, living faith. That's our calling. That's God's purpose for us.

His purpose in choosing. Romans 8.28 Those who love God, those who are the called according to His purpose. If we want to fulfill His purpose, we are going to be chastened.

We are going to have a certain element of fear and trembling when we think about the judgment seat of Christ. There is a lot on the line. There is a wide spectrum of experience for believers, both now and in the future.

There is such a thing as being least in the kingdom. There is such a thing as being great in the kingdom. And if we cleanse ourselves from the dishonorable things, if we pursue righteousness, if we do as Paul mentions in Romans 2, and with great patience we seek for glory and honor and immortality, God will be able to grant to us that standing as a vessel of honor.

The experience of the fullness of eternal life. Life that partakes of the divine. Both now and in the millennial kingdom and beyond.

That's why he says here in 2 Timothy 2.22 Flee youthful desires. Pursue righteousness, faith, love, peace. Doesn't that remind us of Galatians 5.22 The fruit of the Spirit.

Love, joy, peace. With those who call on the Lord out of a pure heart. Avoid foolish and ignorant disputes and so forth.

We decide what kind of vessel we're going to be. Israel decided what kind of vessel they were going to be. And they marred in the hand of the potter.

And he had to make them into a vessel of wrath fitted for destruction. So as we look back at Romans 9, this chapter that began with Paul's sorrow for the sake of his brethren, his kinsmen according to the flesh, who had all of these advantages of being the people and the sons of God. Why are they being set aside? How come they are no longer at the forefront of God's plan and the fulfillment of His calling and His purpose? Why is it that righteousness by faith is being exploited and honored by God more than among the Gentiles, more than among the Jews? That's the question this chapter answers.

What if God, wanting to show His wrath and to make His power known, endured with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath prepared for destruction, for apostasy, for ruin, so that He might make known the riches of His glory on the vessels of mercy which He had prepared beforehand for glory, even us whom He called not only of the Jews but also of the Gentiles? This is talking about faithful believers. This is talking about those who respond, Romans 8.28 believers, those who love God, who live like they're called, who forsake sin and disobedience and make themselves vessels of honor. Any passage you want to go to presents this.

It's very instructive to look at the letters to the churches in Revelation 2 and 3. And our final passage this morning is in Revelation 2 starting in verse 24. You'll recall that Revelation 2 and 3 are letters to the churches. The last words of Christ to us.

Revelation 2.24 Unto you I say and unto the rest in Thyatira, as many as have not this doctrine and which have not known the depths of Satan as they speak, I will put upon you none other burden but that which you already have. Hold fast till I come. Remember you have need of patience and endurance to take possession of the inheritance.

He that overcomes and keeps my works until the end, to him I will give power over the nations. He shall rule them with a rod of iron. Notice.

He shall rule them as with a rod of iron as the vessel of a potter shall they be broken to shivers even as I received my Father. What is this talking about? What period of history? It's the Millennial Kingdom, right? Who do you have in the Millennial Kingdom? What does it start with? Believers. Who is Christ going to rule over with a rod of iron? The nations.

Who are the nations? Well, everyone that starts out in the Millennial Kingdom are believers. You not only have the kingdom centered in Jerusalem and fulfilling the land promises to Israel, but you have nations all over the planet. Who's populating those nations? Believers.

What kind of believers? Believers that did not qualify to live in the kingdom. Who are outside the gates in the darkness which is outside. That's who populates the nations.

Those are the ones who are ruled over. He rules them with a rod of iron like the vessels of a potter where they are broken to shivers. An ongoing result of disobedience and faithlessness in this life is living outside the land in the Millennial Kingdom.

That's why they are ruled over like shattered potter's vessels. It ties this back to the Old Testament, to Isaiah and Jeremiah. How do you become a shattered potter's vessel? By being an unbeliever? No, by being a faithless, disobedient, apathetic, non-responsive child of God.

And those who live in the nations outside the land will be Old Testament saints, will be believers who did not respond, did not take seriously their calling from God. And they will be ruled over in the Millennial Kingdom by Christ and by the faithful, those who have qualified to rule and reign with Christ. He that overcomes and keeps my works until the end.

Does salvation depend on keeping works until the end? Not at all. This is living righteousness, living faith. This is responding to the call of God.

And that's our calling. It's our responsibility. And it's so exciting.

There is a great spectrum of status as a believer in God's estimation. At the judgment seat of Christ there will be those who escape, yet so as by fire. The fruit of their life is nothing.

It's a withered branch. It's gathered and burned. And there will be some believers who are fruitful branches, who are faithful and endure to the end, who persevere and press toward the mark of the high calling of God, who will be at the forefront of the fulfillment of God's purpose and God's

plan, who will experience the blessing and reward that goes to Jesus Christ Himself.

We will walk with Christ in white. We will have a new stone and a name and partake of the hidden manna and all of the wonderful things that are promised to the overcomers of Revelation 2 and 3. It's our choice. God did not predetermine us to destruction in the lake of fire or to salvation.

And He also does not predetermine us to being least in the kingdom or great in the kingdom. We decide that by the priorities that we observe daily. The thoughts and intents of our heart.

How much do we care about the trend of our thinking when we go through the day, when we interact with people, with our spouse or our families or our co-workers or other human beings around us, when we respond to circumstances and events? What is the thought life in our soul like? We tend to think and to be lulled into security by the common teaching in Christianity today that, well, it would really be nice if I was righteous and if I persevered and was faithful and so on, but at worst, I will simply suffer myself and I won't be quite as happy or quite as blessed, but it will all come right in the end when Christ returns and we're glorified. We'll all be sitting around the table and He will gird Himself in service with manna and we'll all be walking in white and so on. Not at all.

There is a big distinction, as we have seen, in the heavenly creation among the heavenly hosts. There are strata. There are principalities and powers and rulers.

There are servants. There are angels. There are lots of different heavenly creatures and they are stratified in the same way that we are going to be stratified.

Some of us are going to shine brightly and reflect the glory of God in the eternal future. Others of us are going to be very dim bulbs and our life will only reflect the glory of God as a vessel of wrath where God's might and power are displayed in disciplining us and shattering us like a potter's vessel. It ought to be a motivation.

It ought to be an encouragement. This is what the author of Hebrews told us. If you look at the law and on the testimony of two or three witnesses, you could suffer discipline under the law of how much greater wrath do you think someone is going to be worthy who disregards the blood of the covenant by which he was sanctified, who tramples underfoot the Son of God and puts him to an open shame.

What do you think is going to happen to believers who are given this calling and given this opportunity and are apathetic and disregarded? Look at what God did to Israel in the Old Testament and you get an idea. God is the same yesterday, today, and forever and God's discipline on those who are apathetic and disregard Him and dishonor Him is severe. We need to know that.

Paul told Timothy, instruct them in these things. They need to know that it's important to be a

vessel of honor and not a vessel of dishonor in 2 Timothy 2. It's a tremendous opportunity and there's a lot on the line. And from those to whom much is given, much is required.

And when the stakes are great, as they are for church-age believers, the rewards and the blessings are terrific. So also are the consequences if we fail the grace of God. And it's an important thing for us to be aware of and it's such a shame that Satan has succeeded in blinding believers to this truth.

And there's nothing that makes him happier than for us to compress the Scriptures and make it nothing more than evangelism while you read it.