

A quick count tells me there are maybe half a dozen lawyers in our church; and some others who have a law degree. [Insert lawyer joke] Don't be surprised. Lawyers are not, shall we say, in short supply these days. That was true in Jeremiah's day as well. Which is why, though not obvious in the English translation, this passage from the prophet's ministry is filled with legal language. The imagery is that of a lawsuit and God is the one filing charges! Israel is the defendant and is on the witness stand. Jeremiah, serving as prosecuting attorney, is grilling the witness on behalf of his plaintiff, who just happens to be the Lord.

This is what the LORD says: *“What fault did your ancestors find in me, that they strayed so far from me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves”* (v. 5). Then comes the indictment: *“But my people have exchanged their glorious God for worthless idols. Be appalled at this, you heavens, and shudder with great horror,” declares the LORD. “My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water”* (vv. 11-13).

Going back to the first question we hear, God's people are *worthless* people who follow *worthless* idols. The Hebrew word for worthless, *hahabel*, conveys the image of a wisp of air, a nothingness. What Jeremiah is saying to his people is not that they have failed to be religious. Why, church attendance is at an all-time high. What he is saying is much worse. All their religious activity means nothing. It's like a constant diet of junk food...all calories and no nutrition. They can go to church all they want, but God looks not only on the places where your legs take you. God also sees where your heart is. And if your heart is not tuned to God's kingdom, you can break every attendance record there is, but it will do you no good if you're not in church for the right reason.

By the way, Israel goes to church for all the wrong reasons. Jeremiah is telling them that the covenant between God and his people has been broken, and they are the guilty party. They have become *hahabel*, a worthless breath of air. The chosen children of God have exchanged their one, true, glorious God for worthless idols, for a vapor quickly seen and just as quickly gone. But it's not just Jeremiah's generation that is guilty. They come by their attitude naturally. Their parents and grandparents did the same: *“What fault did your ancestors find in me, that they strayed so far from me? They followed worthless idols and became worthless themselves?”* (v. 5).

You know me well enough to know that judgment is not a frequent sermon topic of mine. But I may have some catching up to do because “judgment” appears over 400 times in the Bible. I'm fairly sure that the place where I would begin preaching about judgment is that the sins of fathers and mothers are visited upon their children. While Deuteronomy 24:16 says, *“Parents are not to be put to death for their children, nor children put to death for their parents; each will die for their own sin,”* I believe that parents are held accountable to instruct their children in the faith. Did you hear verse 9? *“Therefore I bring charges against you again,” declares the LORD. “And I will bring charges against your children's children.”* Our responsibility for those who come after us can be either a source of great joy or a source of great sadness. I have seen it first hand in the lives of real families.

Perhaps my perspective has been shaped by the fact that I am a baby boomer. My contemporaries were the “drop-out” generation, influenced by such cultural tsunamis as Vietnam and Watergate. We learned to distrust institutions. And the established church, to us, was an institution. Many boomers didn’t see a need to take their children to church. And in some ways we’re paying for it.

Any generation that rejects the church, tends to put in its place the gods of individualism, materialism, secularism, and a lot of other isms. And if you think this distrust has had no effect on younger generations, you’re not paying attention. Why do so few people vote? Why are more families home schooling? There is a deep distrust of institutions. When adult children come back to church, they’re not satisfied with the church as it is. I tend to think that’s a good thing. If the old traditions aren’t getting the job done, and churches do not find new and creative ways of declaring God’s grace, they will surely die.

Let’s head back to Israel’s court trial. They have been faithless, turning their back on God, and they are about to pay for it. A pattern of rejection has moved from one generation to the next, and to the next. God is tired of it, but God also seems to be “at something of a loss to understand it.” So the prosecutor/prophet Jeremiah uses imagery his people could easily understand. *“My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water”* (v.13).

The geography of Israel can help us grasp the significance of God’s deep sadness over the sinfulness of his people. It’s an arid land and water is a prized commodity. The people in that part of the world were protective when it came to water. Thirst—real thirst—was a constant reality. Water collected in cisterns from the infrequent rains had to be carried in jars from distant places. It could easily become stagnant, and possibly polluted, if not retrieved at the right time and right place. Doing so was an important function of day-to-day life.

You see, God cannot understand why his chosen people would go after other gods that were not gods at all. They can come to God and receive living water from a flowing fountain that never runs dry. But instead, they go away from God and carve out shallow cisterns in the sun baked ground. Because they are so shallow, they soon become dry and broken and lie empty. The people of God turned their backs on the living, never-ceasing fountain of rich cool, water to drink stagnant water from the bottom of shallow, broken cisterns.

That was the picture lawyer Jeremiah draws for them of their spiritual condition. Their souls are like broken cisterns filled with stagnant water. They are empty like their gods that are no gods at all.

There’s an old fable, the story of a motherless tiger cub who is adopted by goats. The cub is brought up to speak the language of goats, to emulate their ways and eat their food. In short, he is raised to think he is a goat. Then one day a tiger king comes along. When all the goats scatter in fear before the presence of this ferocious animal, the young tiger is suddenly left alone. He stands before the massive beast, afraid yet somehow not afraid. The tiger king asks him what he means by this unseemly masquerade, but all the young tiger can do in response is to bleat nervously and continue nibbling at the grass. The tiger king carries the cub to a pool of water where he is forced to look at their reflections side-by-side. Perhaps he

will draw the obvious conclusion as to his identity. However, his idea fails. The young tiger still thinks he is a goat.

Finally, the tiger king offers the cub a piece of raw meat. At first, the young tiger recoils from the unfamiliar taste of it. But then, as he eats more of it and begins to feel it warming his blood, the truth gradually becomes clear to him. Lashing his tail and digging his claws into the ground, the young tiger raises his head high, and the jungle trembles at the sound of his roar. He is not a goat. He is a tiger. He has been eating grass when he could have had meat! (© 2004, Randy L. Hyde)

Jeremiah is telling Israel that they are not living out their true identity. They drink stagnant water from broken cisterns when they could find fulfillment in a never-ending, gushing fountain of life! They are selling out too short, following after gods that are no gods at all. They have forgotten who they are.

Sometimes I wonder what God thinks of us. We rush around looking for meaning in all the wrong places, wasting our time and energy. And all the while, the more important things of life are right in front of us: seeking justice for all people; looking after the needs of those who cannot care for themselves; working for the common welfare of everyone, including people who are not like us; and doing all this in the name of Jesus. *We too have exchanged our glorious God for worthless idols.* But we have Someone who stands beside us, pleading our case before the everlasting Judge, and asking that his mercy and grace be the final word. So let's not wait until it's too late to ask Jesus to put in a good word for us. Because, brothers and sisters, court is in session. Amen.