

Object Lessons For Biblical Counseling

By Wendy Wood

It is the goal of a biblical counselor to teach and instruct, and help a counselee to learn and apply the truths of Scripture. As a former classroom teacher of elementary and high school students, I realize that people learn in different ways. Some people are able to hear a teaching or listen to a book explain something and they remember and apply the information they have heard. These people are often called auditory learners. Other people are more visual learners. It helps them to see the words in print or to draw a picture that represents the information in order to understand and apply it. Still other people are really tactile learners, where information is best understood when physical senses are engaged and real people and objects are used to teach principles. My goal in the next few blogs is to help you reach the third category of people who need a more personal or physical experience with information to best learn and apply it. It might be that English is not your counselee's first language or maybe they have a learning disability that also makes object lessons helpful. Each blog will describe an object lesson for a specific passage of scripture that is often used in biblical counseling.

Jeremiah 2:11-13 “Has a nation changed its gods, even though they are no gods? But my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit. Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the LORD, for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.”

In counseling, Jeremiah 2:11-13 can be used to demonstrate the futility of chasing after other gods to satisfy our souls. As you listen to your counselee describe their life and their responses to life, you will begin to hear how and what they pursue to fill up the loneliness or disappointments of life. For example, you may have a counselee who is single and upon coming home to an empty house at night, immediately turns on the television for noise and “company” rather than have silence. Or maybe this same single counselee has activities that are scheduled for every night of the week, week after week, so that they never have to be alone. Maybe you have a married counselee

who is in debt because buying new things brings happiness when they have a disagreement with their spouse. Maybe you have a college student counselee who plays four hours of video games a day rather than study because classes are challenging but he finds success achieving new levels of the game. Maybe you have a 25 year old woman who is serial dating because being in a relationship makes her feel secure and loved. Whatever you counselee is pursuing other than God is a “broken cistern”.

What jumps out of the text is that God calls for the heavens to be “appalled” and shocked at this exchange of worshipping the true God for worthless idols. The strong language will help you counselee understand the seriousness of sin. But this lesson will focus on the idea that we want our counselees to see the two evils God is addressing in this passage. First, a counselee is forsaking God. Second, the counselee is turning to another God.

Object Lesson:

Materials: 2 plastic or styrofoam cups
A pitcher of water
A garbage can or bowl large enough to hold the amount of water in pitcher
A statue or object that represents a god (maybe a glass animal or wood carving of some kind)



Set Up: One cup will be left intact and the other cup will have some slits or small holes cut into the bottom and sides to represent the broken cistern)

Directions:

Read Jeremiah 2:11-13. Discuss with your counselee that Jeremiah is warning the Israelites that they are in sin and God is calling them to repent. Rather than loving, serving, worshipping, and honoring God, they are turning to the gods of the nations

around them. The Israelites have repeatedly tried to pursue happiness in sacrificing to false gods of man-made carvings and statues. You can use your item that represents a “god” and talk about how people today still pray to inanimate objects and place their hope in a statue god hearing them and responding to their gift of money or prayer. I talk about seeing people in Japan walk into a shrine and clap their hands loudly to wake up their god before chanting and pleading for help. I also saw people in Japan rubbing the belly of statues while crying and hoping for relief from a circumstance in life. Help your counselee see how they turn to their idol - maybe a comfort, control, power, or approval - for relief from their circumstances. Sometimes it is helpful to read Isaiah 44:6-23 to help make the point of an idol or other god people worship. God makes it clear that only the Lord, the Creator and Sustainer of life, is alive and active in the lives of His children. It is futile to turn to objects or any other pursuit to find hope.

The Lord, Not Idols

“This is what the Lord says—

Israel’s King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty:

I am the first and I am the last;

apart from me there is no God.

Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it.

Let him declare and lay out before me

what has happened since I established my ancient people,

and what is yet to come—

yes, let them foretell what will come.

Do not tremble, do not be afraid.

Did I not proclaim this and foretell it long ago?

You are my witnesses. Is there any God besides me?

No, there is no other Rock; I know not one.”

All who make idols are nothing,

and the things they treasure are worthless.

Those who would speak up for them are blind;

they are ignorant, to their own shame.

Who shapes a god and casts an idol,

which can profit nothing?

People who do that will be put to shame;

such craftsmen are only human beings.

Let them all come together and take their stand;

they will be brought down to terror and shame.

The blacksmith takes a tool

and works with it in the coals;

he shapes an idol with hammers,

he forges it with the might of his arm.

He gets hungry and loses his strength;

he drinks no water and grows faint.

The carpenter measures with a line

and makes an outline with a marker;

he roughs it out with chisels

and marks it with compasses.

He shapes it in human form,

human form in all its glory,

that it may dwell in a shrine.

He cut down cedars,

or perhaps took a cypress or oak.

He let it grow among the trees of the forest,

or planted a pine, and the rain made it grow.

It is used as fuel for burning;

some of it he takes and warms himself,

he kindles a fire and bakes bread.

But he also fashions a god and worships it;

he makes an idol and bows down to it.

Half of the wood he burns in the fire;

over it he prepares his meal,

he roasts his meat and eats his fill.

He also warms himself and says,

“Ah! I am warm; I see the fire.”

From the rest he makes a god, his idol;

he bows down to it and worships.

He prays to it and says,

“Save me! You are my god!”

They know nothing, they understand nothing;

their eyes are plastered over so they cannot see,

and their minds closed so they cannot understand.

No one stops to think,

no one has the knowledge or understanding to say,

“Half of it I used for fuel;

I even baked bread over its coals,

I roasted meat and I ate.

Shall I make a detestable thing from what is left?

Shall I bow down to a block of wood?"

Such a person feeds on ashes; a deluded heart misleads him;

he cannot save himself, or say,

"Is not this thing in my right hand a lie?"

"Remember these things, Jacob,

for you, Israel, are my servant.

I have made you, you are my servant;

Israel, I will not forget you.

I have swept away your offenses like a cloud,

your sins like the morning mist.

Return to me,

for I have redeemed you."

Sing for joy, you heavens, for the Lord has done this;

shout aloud, you earth beneath.

Burst into song, you mountains,

you forests and all your trees,

for the Lord has redeemed Jacob,

he displays his glory in Israel.

Now you can demonstrate the futility of gods and idols with your cups and pitcher of water. Refer back to Jeremiah 2:11-13. The cup that is complete represents God. Describe God as the Creator and the sovereign One who designed life for His purpose

and gives us everything we need to live a life that pleases Him (2 Peter 1:3, Isaiah 43:7, 1 Corinthians 10:31). The first evil is that we set aside this cup, that represents God, and forsake Him. We say with our actions, “No thanks, God. Your way of pursuing joyful living isn’t fast or efficient. I have a better way to live on my own.” (Set this cup to the side of your desk.) Then, pick up the cup that has holes. Talk about this cup being the counselee’s way of doing things. This is your cistern of life. You are wanting to fill up your life with happiness and instant gratification. You are chasing after the comforts, approval, control or power that makes you feel good. Third, as you pour water from the pitcher into the cup (over the garbage can or bowl since water will be leaking out the bottom and sides) talk about the specific ways your counselee seeks hope and joy from worldly pursuits. As the water begins to fill the cup, acknowledge that there are some short term results that provide happiness or relief. Going out every night does take loneliness away for a while. Buying new clothes or toys does feel good for a week or so. Avoiding hard work in favor of video games does bring some relief and fun. But as the water seeps out of the cup, explain how you have to keep chasing after those “gods” because they don’t ultimately satisfy. The instant relief or happiness fades and more is needed. This is the “broken cistern” that our counselees turn to instead of pressing hard into the Lord and experiencing the lasting joy and contentment that comes from being His child. Then, go back to the cup without holes. As you pour water into this cup that is filled up completely, and stays full, talk about how a close, dependent, humble, righteous life in Christ is lasting happiness and joy. We are designed to be filled with Christ, because that’s how our Creator made us. Only God will truly satisfy our souls. As the cup is filling (and begins to overflow) talk about God as Father, Sympathetic High Priest, our Shepherd, our Light, our Refuge, our Friend. As we and our counselees are filled by being in close relationship with God, our joy will overflow to other relationships. We will be able to love and encourage other people because we won’t be focused on trying to fill up our own lives with empty pursuits.

Hopefully this visual example of how we chase after empty idols and gods will give your tactile learners a helpful visual of what life is like when lived by worldly goals and how pursuing God and the life He designed us for brings joy and fullness of life.