

Sermon Series: Breath and Living Water

#2 Life-giving Spirit John 7:37-39

[VIDEO - Sprite Ad with Lebron James: “Where does my thirst come from?”]

Lebron James is one of the most recognizable sportspeople on the planet. And Sprite is one of the most recognisable brands in the USA. For the past 17 years LeBron and Sprite have been synonymous, but a new contract with Pepsi has left fans wondering what went wrong. Sprite, you see, is not just sugary water with bubbles, to many marginalised black hip hop music artists in the USA Sprite stands for hope and life after decades of investment in down and out communities.



I can guess what is driving LeBron’s change to Pepsi, but back then, when that advert was made, LeBron was committed to a more noble cause. He asks a question, **“Where does my thirst come from?”**

Try rephrasing LeBron’s question for yourself: “Where does *my* thirst come from?” could become “What drives me?” or “What do I truly seek in life to be truly satisfied?”

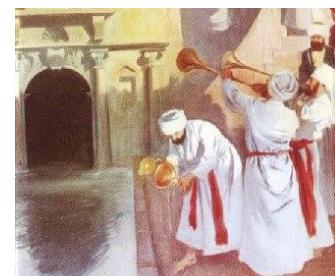
In John’s Gospel chapter 7 Jesus cries out to a great crowd in Jerusalem:

“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me...”

If you think about it, isn’t this the original way to say, **“Obey your thirst”**.

This makes more sense when we **get a picture** of what was going on around Jesus at the time he spoke these words. Jesus was teaching about God in Jerusalem during a big religious festival known as **The Feast of Tabernacles** (or Festival of Booths).

This important **annual festival** was based on commands written in Leviticus chapter 23. It was celebrated to remember God’s saving love for the Hebrews in the wilderness long ago.¹



¹ Lev. 23:41-43

John tells us that Jesus cried out ...“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me” on the **very last of the seven days** of the feast.

History tells on that **last day** priests would collect water from the cisterns and **carry the water** to the altar in the temple. This was to recall God's great provision of water from the rock during Israel's time in the wilderness, recorded in Exodus 17:1–7.² The priests would then **circle the altar seven times** with a container of water as the Scriptures were recited telling of God's saving grace to their ancestors.

Perhaps at **this very moment** Jesus cried out his challenging invitation: ...“**Let anyone who is thirsty come to me.**”

What do you “thirst” for most in life? Once, LeBron James longed for justice and hope for young black kids. Often wealth, fame and success or other temporary sources of satisfaction can become the treasure of our hearts too?

What drives you? What do you thirst for? Where is your treasure? Jesus once said, “Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Matt. 6:21).

In the Beatitudes of Matthew Chapter 5 Jesus commended those who are thirsty for **righteousness** (vs. 6). We can unpack that rather religious technical word “righteousness” to mean something like “the **justice and love of God**”. Jesus commended those with a great thirst: those **who truly thirst** for *God's* love and justice to be realized in this world.

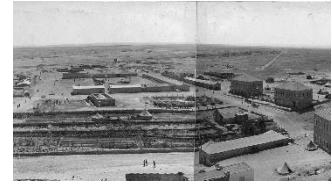
During the liberation of Palestine in WW1, an example of great thirst is found in the story of a combined force of British Australian and NZ soldiers was closely pursuing the Turkish troops as they retreated from the desert. Moving northward... their water ran out, their mouths got dry, their heads ached, and they became dizzy and faint; even spotting mirages before them on several occasions.



They knew that if they did not make the wells of Sheriah by nightfall, thousands of them would die, as hundreds had already done.

² In Exodus chapter 17, Moses complained that the people of God thirsted, not for God who loved them and saved them, but for temporary relief. Jeremiah in his prophecy to the exiles showed how the people rejected God, the “fountain of living water” and preferred their own cracked and broken jars (Jer. 2:13).

Somehow, they made it to the wells. Distribution of water from the cisterns was slow and tedious. It took **four hours** till the last soldier had his drink. During the life-saving procedure, the soldiers stood no more than 6 metres from thousands of litres of life-giving water which had been their consuming passion for many agonizing days. One of the officers who was present reported, “I believe that we all learned our **first real Bible lesson** on the march from Beersheba to Sheriah Wells. If such were our thirst for God, for righteousness and for God’s will in our lives, a consuming, all-embracing, preoccupying desire, how rich in the fruit of the Spirit would we be?³



When Jesus cried out on that day during the Festival of Booths “Let anyone who thirsts come to me” he was **searching for those whose thirst** is great for God’s **love and justice**. He was declaring that **true satisfaction** of the soul’s thirst is found in Him.

Like travellers longing for water in a desert⁴ or like animals searching for fresh water in a forest⁵ Jesus calls out to souls that recognise Him as the very **source of life**. As he once told a Samaritan woman at a well, “I will give water that will become in [you] a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”⁶

Do you think your ears would have pricked up at Jesus’ call to “come to him and drink”? Would you have thought his invitation strange, or would you have been curious? Is your soul still seeking that which truly satisfies and lasts?

When Jesus spoke out to the crowd as described in John chapter 7, he didn’t **just point to himself**, but he also forecast the coming work of the Holy Spirit⁷ who would be **poured out on all who would believe** in Jesus.⁸ Jesus said to them,

³ E.M. Blaiklock, “Water” *Eternity* (August 1966), p. 27

⁴ Ps. 63:1

⁵ Ps. 42:1,2

⁶ John 4:10–13. See too John 6:35 and Old Testament examples, “O God, you are my God, I seek you, my soul thirsts for you; my flesh faints for you, as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.” Ps 63:1. Proverbs 18:4 and Zechariah 14:8 an Isaiah 55:1 involve similar themes. Given the priestly ritual’s connection to the story of water from the rock, Jesus might have had Psalm 78:12–16 in mind. Likewise, the idea of life, or God’s truth, being a stream or spring is common in the Bible. The imagery implies something living, pure, and life-giving (Revelation 22:1–2).

⁷ in verse 39 John explains: “Now he said this about the [Holy] Spirit, which believers in him were to receive; for as yet the Holy Spirit had not been given,[m] because Jesus was not yet glorified.”

⁸ See Acts chapter 2

“...and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water’” (Jn. 7³⁸).⁹

Jesus’ quote cannot be found in direct form, but perhaps he was summing up **Ezekiel’s** great prophecy of a life-giving river flowing from a future temple. Perhaps he had in mind the prophecies of Ezekiel and Jeremiah that the Spirit of God would one day **replace hearts of stone** with faithful **new hearts and new spirits** in God’s people.¹⁰ Jesus longs to **supply our hearts** with a stream of **life-giving grace** that expresses itself in **service and love to others** by the power of His Spirit.¹¹

Did you notice in John 7:38 Jesus speaks of “**living** water”. The Greek word for “living” can mean both **lively** (as in bubbling and fresh) or **life-giving**. In contrast to the stagnant water in the temple’s cisterns for the ceremonies, he pictures himself as “**living water**” and the love that will flow from his followers as the same.

When Penne and I travelled to **Iceland**, we remarked over and over at how we felt like we had never really seen or tasted real water. The water we experienced from the arctic streams that descend from melting glaciers, bubbling, refreshing, alive and powerful seemed like water of another order altogether! Jesus offer to the crowd, to us too, was of satisfaction for the soul of a different order.



Everyone who lived in Palestine of old had a perfect example of the difference that living water makes. The **Sea of Galilee** to the North **freely receives and gives out water**. It has an **abundance of life**, nurturing many different kinds of fish and plant life. But the water in the **Dead Sea** to the south only takes water (from the Jordan) in and **does not give out**. There is nothing living, no fish or plant life in the Dead Sea. The powerful life-giving waters of the Sea of Galilee



⁹ Curiously, we can find no direct quote from the Old Testament to correspond exactly to Jesus’ words here.

¹⁰ See Ezek. 47 and Ezek. 36:25-27

¹¹ As used by Jesus, this internal spring, or stream, is indicative of the Holy Spirit, which comes to live inside all who come to faith in Christ, a reality only possible after Jesus’ ascension (Acts 2:1-4).

flow down the Jordan river, but become dead when mixed with the hoarded waters of the Dead Sea.

Jesus' controversial and divine claim¹² on that day long ago in Jerusalem (John 7:38) was that **He is** the fountain of *living* water. Those who come to Him, and drink of His life-giving Spirit will never be thirsty; their souls **will** be satisfied. So too, those who believe in him and follow his ways will make this "water" accessible to others as the Spirit works in and through them; no doubt through the sharing of the Gospel, through sacrificial service, through prayer, and works of justice and peace.

The great 18th Century revivalist preacher, Jonathan Edwards, said of these words:

"Christ is like a river...There are fresh supplies of water coming from the fountainhead continually, so that [one] may live by it, and be supplied with water all [throughout] life. So, Christ is an ever-flowing fountain; continually supplying his people, and the fountain is not spent. They who live upon Christ may have fresh supplies from him to all eternity; they may have an increase of blessedness that is new, and new still, and which never will come to an end."

Bishop Gregory of the 4th Century said, "Jesus ended His earthly ministry by being thirsty, yet He is the Living Water."

My encouragement this Pentecost Sunday is to **obey your thirst**. Let your **deepest yearning** for love and justice as God desires it drive your own choices and preferences as you follow Jesus and respond to his Spirit. In your worship today, respond afresh to Jesus' invitation: "Come and drink of Him" for life's **true satisfaction**. In your prayers and devotions this week, call upon God's **Spirit to be the source of love and good deeds** that brings refreshment to the lives of others around you, to God's glory.

Steve Webster

St Michaels North Carlton

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¹² See the self-description of God in Jeremiah 2:13