

# Rivers From the Heart

by John Piper

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*The sermon explores the significance of John 7:37-38, where Jesus invites all people to come and drink from Him, and the condition of thirsting is a desire for God and a longing for the Kingdom.*

**Duration:** 31:56

**Scripture:** Matthew 6:33, John 7:37-38, Acts 20:35, Revelation 22:17

**Topics:** "Living Water", "Spiritual Fulfillment"

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## Description

In this sermon, the focus is on John 7:37-38, where Jesus proclaims, 'If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink.' The speaker emphasizes that when we come to Jesus and believe in him, our hearts will be filled with rivers of living water. This living water represents the satisfaction and fulfillment that only Jesus can provide. The sermon encourages listeners to seek God's kingdom, repent, and believe in the gospel, assuring them that Jesus is the answer to their thirst for God. The ultimate goal is not just to receive from Jesus, but to become rivers of living water, overflowing with praise to God and love for others.

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## Transcript

If you want to follow along, the text for the message this morning comes from John 7, verses 37 and 38. If you'd like to take a Bible from the pew there in front of you, if you don't have one, those two verses will be the focus of our attention for the remainder of the hour. The text, the words of Jesus, on the last day of the feast, the great day Jesus stood up and proclaimed, if anyone thirsts, let him come to me and drink.

He who believes in me, as the scripture says, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water. Some images are very repulsive, some images are very, very attractive to our hearts. This is an attractive image.

Wouldn't you agree that most people desire to think of their own hearts as something so deep and rich that it's like a mountain spring giving up clear water and making rivers to flow down a mountain. Even before we get a clear idea of what this refers to in reality, this image of drinking and rivers, we're attracted to it, we yearn for it, because it seems to imply fullness and completeness to the point of overflow. It seems to imply coolness and refreshment during hot summer days.

It seems to imply moisture and growth and life, things that we just naturally are attracted to and want to be the principles of our heart. But, Jesus isn't mainly a poet using evocative language to kindle strong feelings in us. I think he is that, at least, but much more.

These very, very evocative words refer to something real, something solid, something outside ourselves which would be there if we laughed at the scorn, or be there if we died and were no longer around. There's something real, objective, outside ourselves that's being referred to as well as our experience. The words are not meant to make us feel good by their beauty, they are meant to put us in touch with something real that makes an ultimate and eternal difference in our lives, not just in our feelings.

Jesus was offering a very, very desirable experience. I can't read this without being made thirsty and hungry for Jesus. It is desirable, but he's no mere image.

There has to be a dealing with Jesus if this experience is not going to just slip through our fingers and result in emptiness. There has to be something real, solid, strong, and hard, you might say, outside ourselves, not just warm, fuzzy feelings inside ourselves. So, when we think about this text, here in John 7, 37, we will talk about the experience, but it'll all be in vain if Jesus doesn't shine through with all his distinct power and beauty overall.

Now, I think it's really important to see the historical context of this saying that Jesus makes. Verse 37 says that it was on the last day of the feast, the great day. Now, if you read back to the beginning of the chapter, in verse 2 of chapter 7, you'll find out that it's the Feast of Tabernacles, or the Feast of Booths, that he's talking about.

And in verse 14 of chapter 7, it says that in the middle of the feast, it's a seven-day feast, he went up to Jerusalem, and he talked. So, for three days he's been there, and now he's at the end of the feast, and he stands up to say this saying, and John evidently thinks it's worth mentioning that it was on the last day of the Feast of Tabernacles that he says what he says about water. Let's get a glimpse into the background of this feast.

We find it in Leviticus 23. Moses says, You shall dwell in booths, little huts made out of branches, dwell in booths for seven days, and all native in Israel shall dwell in booths, that your generations may know that I made the people of Israel dwell in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt. I am the Lord, your God.

God ordained that the people of Israel have constantly brought back to their mind His gracious and powerful deeds through recurrent festivals, or feasts, and so this is one of those feasts. God's purpose in bringing the people out of Egypt, and then blessing them and guiding them through the wilderness, was to demonstrate to them how powerful He was on their behalf, and how much He loved them, so that never again would they go after any other god, but cleave only to Him. That's the main point.

Now the feast of booths reminds the people of this trek through the wilderness right after they left Egypt and were heading towards Sinai, and during that time, you'll remember, God miraculously took care of them in a number of ways. One of the needs He met was water. In Exodus 17, Moses tells us how the people, soon after they had left Egypt, passed through the wilderness of sin, headed down the Sinai Peninsula, arrived at Rephidim and camped.

And there was no water there. And instead of trusting God, who had split the sea wide open for them, to show them He could always take care of them, it says that the people thirsted there for water and murmured against Moses. So Moses goes to God, throws up his hands at this people, asks God for water, and God cleaves a rock, and water comes out for the people, so that they can drink and satisfy their thirst in the wilderness.

Now, on the last day of the feast of tabernacles, celebrating this precious care that God had given the people as they came through the wilderness, Jesus stands up and says, If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. Now, I doubt that the people listening caught on to what was going on. But we're at a distinct advantage, because John has put together numerous ways in which Jesus has picked up a theme or an event in the Old Testament and fulfilled it.

And that's what's happening here. Jesus, I think, is claiming in a veiled way, I am the fulfillment of everything that your festivals celebrate. If there's any power God exercised on your behalf, if there's any grace He showed you in history, you don't need to look back for that anymore.

You can look straight to Me. It's all summed up and fulfilled in Me. God has drawn near in His Son, and He has offered us the Kingdom.

Like Jesus says in Mark, The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe the Gospel. So, when Jesus cries out at the Feast of Booths, If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink.

I understand this to mean, If you're thirsty for God, Israel, focusing first just on Israel, then we can take it as it applies to us. If you're thirsty for God, if you're longing for the consolation of Israel, like Simeon was, if you are yearning and eagerly looking for the Kingdom, like Anna was, if you desire deliverance from oppression and sin, you don't need to look back anymore, you don't need to look forward anymore, look at Me. Because all the past history and all the future promises are summed up in Me.

And how important it is that we know who it is from whom we drink. It's not a very exciting thing for a man to stand up and say, Come to me and drink, if he's just a nobody. But if we could see who Jesus is, as the One who arches over all of history and sums up the past and the future in one, that every blessing God has to give is found in Jesus, then when He says, Come to Me and drink, then we know there's satisfaction to be found there.

I think lots of times, we drink at Jesus' fountain and it tastes insipid because we just haven't seen Jesus in His true biblical proportions. We have not gathered together the mighty acts of God and shown that here is the embodiment of all the glory that the future has to offer and all the great deeds that the past recorded. But if we catch that, then we'll come to Him and we'll drink.

Now, I think we're in a position, better, to look directly at the invitation itself. If any man or anyone thirsts, let him come. There's an invitation and there's a condition.

The invitation is without any boundaries ethnically, intellectually, socially. The word goes out to everybody. Everybody in this room, no matter who you are, receives a personalized invitation from Jesus to come and drink at His fountain and become rivers of living water.

My father is in evangelism and has been in evangelism for 40 years. And he told me, and this is, by the way, an explanation of how this condition of thirsting is necessary. Not only is the way open to anybody, that person has to desire to come.

My father used to say, you can remember, the hard thing in evangelism is not getting men saved. The hard thing is getting men lost. Or to put it a different way, the hard thing in the ministry is not satisfying the hearts of men with Jesus, it's getting them to thirst for Jesus.

If people are thirsty, He'll satisfy them. But there's great competition for our taste buds and we do not naturally thirst for God anymore. God did make us with spiritual taste buds on our hearts so that we would relish fellowship with Him.

God made us for Himself. But now we have become sinners. And what that means, I think, most fundamentally, is that these little taste buds on the tongue of our soul are diseased.

Callouses have grown over them. And no longer is it in the least attractive to drink Jesus for the average fallen person. All men thirst, but not all men thirst for God.

And that's the prerequisite for coming to Jesus. We're the only species, aren't we? The only species in creation who are cursed and blessed with chronic longing, chronic restlessness. Dolphins are content to play in the sea, frolic around in the ocean.

Dogs are content to lie in the sun. No neuroses at all. Frogs are content to bump their belly from pond to pond.

But man is always restless. Never content. Never.

Everything we set our hand to gets old. We're weary of it. We fight an unending battle with an epidemic of boredom.

No matter how challenging your job is, fad after fad, fashion after fashion, challenge after challenge comes our way and leaves us thirsty when it's all over. And we wonder what more there could be. Why? Why? It's a blessing.

It's a hidden blessing. There's a poem called *The Pulley* by George Herbert from the 17th century. And it expresses so beautifully this purpose of God in our restlessness.

Listen to this poem called *The Pulley*. The Pulley means God's pulley, how to pull us to himself. When God at first made man, having a glass of blessings standing by, let us, said he, pour on him all we can.

Let the world's riches which disperse it lie contract into a span. So strength first made a way, then beauty flowed, then wisdom, honor, pleasure. When almost all was out, God made a stay, perceiving that alone of all his treasures rest in the bottom lay.

If I should, said he, bestow this jewel also on my creature, he would adore my gifts instead of me and rest in nature, not the God of nature, so both should losers be. Yet let him keep the rest, but keep them with repining restlessness. Let him be rich and weary, that at last, if goodness lead him not, yet weariness may toss him to my breast.

We are afflicted and blessed with a chronic restlessness as human beings and unique among all the creation like that. An insatiable soul thirst for we know not what. And the reason is this, God aims to keep us searching until we find our rest and our water in Jesus.

And he aims that once we found it, to keep turning us back as we attempted to go and dabble at the spring and dabble at that spring, he makes it taste terrible. The taste buds of our souls were made to relish fellowship with God. But we've become sinners and therefore if we're going to come to Jesus and drink, there has to be some surgery, some physician work on our soul.

And Jesus called himself the good physician. He's got to reach in there, cut away these calluses, tenderize, bring those nerves back to life again that have grown old and dead so that when the water touches them, we sense here's life. This is where satisfaction is to be found.

Paul said, The unspiritual man does not receive the gifts of the Spirit of God for they are folly to him. An unspiritual man is simply a man who's got no spiritual taste buds. And therefore when he sees spiritual people delighting to come to Jesus in worship and study and witness and service, he just scratches his head and says fool or hypocrite or this makes no sense at all.

There are no ways he can understand. And that's a tragic thing. Jesus gives an invitation and he gives it with the assumption that we can be changed.

That's a dead issue for the person who's spiritual. He hears Jesus say, Come to me, all you who are thirsty. And that person says, I don't see anything in that invitation that I'm the least bit attracted by.

But God is gracious, very, very gracious. He frustrates, mercifully frustrates the human race again and again and again. He sees to it that every wreath withers and every gold cup tarnishes and every strong muscle droops and sags and every beautiful face starts to get wrinkled.

Every sexual exploit turns sour and every sin leaves a sting until we've pushed him too far. And all that is mercy. He is mercifully opposing us that we might not love nature but the God of nature.

He wants us for himself. He wants everything in the world to appear dull and unsatisfactory and unattractive except for him. And if you this morning feel the slightest tug toward this water that Jesus gives, this spiritual renewal, this forgiveness, this purpose in life, this hope for eternity, know this, God is at work on your heart.

God is at work cutting the old calluses away. He's a merciful surgeon. And maybe, maybe all you feel right now is what I don't really desire Jesus.

He's not that exciting to me but I kind of desire to desire and that too is a kind of thirst for God. Don't let it go. Fan it into a flame with earnest pleadings to the mercy of God who can kindle such a teeny little spark into a flame of faith.

Let nothing stand in your way. There is only one condition. You only need to desire.

In the last chapter of the Bible, in Revelation 22, you get a restatement with just a little bit of different words of what our text says. In Revelation 22, John says, The spirit and the bride say come and let him who hears say come and let him who is thirsty come and let him who desires take the water of life without price. There is no money.

There is no moral track record. There is nothing that you can bring but one thing. Hunger.

Empty hunger for Jesus and that's all he requires that we come to him hungry. Let him who desires take the water of life without price. And I pray that God will be gracious to us this morning, to me and to everyone in this room to be cutting away those calluses and massaging and bringing back to life the spiritual taste buds on the tongue of our soul so that the offer of Jesus come drink is an attractive offer that will lure us into him.

And now, let's assume that that's happened. What does it mean then to drink? To come and to drink. Jesus isn't here in this room physically.

If he were, and I said come to him, nobody would have any doubt what to do. Get out of your chair and walk over to where he is. Now he's not here.

What does it mean when I say come to him? It must be a movement not of the body but of the heart. Now what is this movement of the heart? What is this soul drinking? Sometimes we stand before a scene in nature. Say the Grand Canyon.

And we stand there in silence and when it's over and we're thinking about it, we say to somebody, I just stood there and drank it in. Or we change the metaphor a little bit and we say, my eyes feasted on the beauty. What do we mean by that? We mean simply that we put ourselves in a position to behold beauty.

That's the first thing. And then we said yes to it. We didn't contradict it.

We didn't deny it. We didn't do anything but affirm its worth. We didn't call it unreal.

We trusted it. That its beauty would not corrupt us but would sanctify us and purify us. It would be good for us and not bad for us.

And we just let it have its sway in us as we sat there and drank it in. And I think it's the same way with Jesus. First of all, we put ourselves in a position to drink or in a position to see.

Now, that happens today through the Word. You can't see Jesus except through His Word in three possible forms. Bible, message from a preacher, or lived out in a life.

You can only see Jesus in His Word. And Jesus said in John 6, the words that I have spoken to you, these are spirit and life. It's in the words of Jesus that we find the life-giving Jesus.

The words of Jesus carry the living water from His soul to our soul. And then, having fixed our gaze on the beauty of Jesus in His promises and in His Word, then we say yes to it. We don't call it into question.

We don't call it unreal. We don't dispute with it. We affirm its worth.

And we just give ourselves up to it that it might have its power upon us. And we trust. That's a key word, I think.

We trust that the effect that it will have will not be evil but good. And we rest in the certainty that this truth will never leave us empty. There's another way to describe the drinking.

I think drinking at the fountain of Jesus is virtually the same as believing Jesus. You can see this here as we move between verses 37 and 38. It says in verse 37, "...Come to Me and drink.

He who believes in Me, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." So the jump from drinking to believing is probably nothing more than a synonym. And I find that confirmed when I look at chapter 6, verse 35, where it says, "...He who believes in Me shall never thirst." So believing Christ is virtually the same as drinking Him in. We see His words placarded before us.

We fix our faith on them. And the joy of those promises flows in and that is drinking. The essence of drinking is trusting in the promises of Jesus.

And the reverse is true also. The essence of trusting is being satisfied by the water or the promises of Jesus. Drinking is believing and believing is drinking.

And now notice the difference between verses 635, chapter 6, verse 35, and our text. There is a crucial difference here that I think helps us catch on to something very important. In John 6, 35, we find the promise that if we believe, we'll never thirst again.

But that's not what we find promised in our text in verse 38 of chapter 7. In our text it says, "...If anyone thirsts, let him come to Me and drink. He who believes in Me, as the Scripture has said, out of his heart will flow rivers of living water." 635 promises fullness up to the brim. 738 promises overflowing, over the brim.

We're not just going to be receptacles, we're going to be also rivers. And that meets one of our deepest longings, I think. In drinking from Jesus, we become not merely receivers, we become rivers.

And that is what we desire probably more than anything. Now, notice three things that have to be related here. Drinking from Jesus, feeling complete satisfaction so that we never thirst, and overflowing in blessing to other people in love and to God in praise.

Now, how do those three relate? A few years ago, I would have said something like this. Well, first of all, you've got to come to Jesus and drink. Then, having drunk deeply at the fountain of Jesus, you're full, you're satisfied, all your needs are met, and then third, as a result of that fullness, you spill over onto other people so that blessing others is a result of being fully satisfied.

And now, I don't think that that's adequate anymore for two reasons, that way of relating those three things. There's a text and there's an experience that keeps me from thinking that's adequate. The text is Acts 20, 35, which says, it is more blessed to give than to receive.

Now, if that's true, then full blessedness does not precede and enable giving. It is found in and because of giving. So, it's just not adequate to say, first you drink from Jesus, then you're fully satisfied, then you give to others out of your complete fullness, because you've got no complete fullness, evidently, until you are giving, because it's more blessed to give.

That's the textual reason. There's this experiential reason. Don't we all know from experience that what we long for is not at rock bottom to be a receptacle, but to be a river.

We all know, you have all experienced times in your spiritual life when you have drunk deep in some spiritual time, whether through preaching or Bible study or a conference, but it has gone sour on you, and the pool became brackish rather than becoming a fountain that flows out. And the reason for that is that, evidently, we can't maintain joy in God if God is not flowing through us, but only flowing into us. So the way I would explain those three things now is this.

Everything starts with thirsting for Jesus. Everything starts with feeling a soul hunger for Jesus Christ. And then two things happen.

When that touches our soul, we get thirstier. We want more and more, like Paul talked about in Philippians 3. But the other thing that happens, it's like magic. I like to think of it as Jesus' magical farming.

A drop of His living water falls on the dry, parched ground of our heart. And we might think that all that happens is a little pile of mud is formed. But in Jesus' magic, what's formed is a little spring and starts

bubbling up.

And that leads us to the second point, which was third, and now it's second. We drink in when the blessing of Jesus, which we sense to be really satisfying and what we really want in the long run, touches our hearts, springs start to bubble up. And we give.

We overflow onto others. Praise to God. Love to each other.

And third, as a result of that, and in that experience, we know satisfaction. A satisfaction that alone can really meet our needs. Now one final comment, and I think this will take us back to where we began.

Lest we think of our getting from Jesus, our overflowing onto others, and our experiencing deep, lasting satisfaction is just all a subjective group of emotions resulting from some evocative language in the Scripture. Lest we think that's the case, John adds verse 39. Now this he said about the Spirit, which those who believed in Him were to receive.

For as yet the Spirit had not yet been given, because Jesus was not yet glorified. Do not think that what you receive from Christ by faith and give to others in love is just a subjective experience. It is God.

God the Holy Spirit. You can find it in many places in the New Testament, especially Galatians 3 and Galatians 5. It is by faith in the promises of Jesus that we receive the Spirit into us, drinking Him in. Paul says we've all drunk of one Spirit.

And it is by faith that the fruit of the Spirit flows out in love. In this motion, it is not mere subjective feelings that's going on. It is a divine transaction and God Himself is at work.

And I find that tremendously encouraging. That gives marrow to the bones of my subjective experience. It assures me, it comforts me to know that behind all the promissory notes of the Gospel stands the stable currency of divine objectivity outside myself, not just inside me by my emotions.

So my prayer for all of us this morning in conclusion is that the Spirit might work on us. Even now, as you hear these words, might start with His merciful scalpel and remove some of those calluses. Massage some of those taste buds on the tongue of your soul back into life, so that when Jesus offers water from Himself, it's attractive.

It's desirable. It's like water on a hot, hot day. And then if that happens, then we can be assured that the most important and desirable thing of all will happen, namely, He will make us rivers of living water.

And that's what we desire above all. We don't want to be merely receptacles. We want to be rivers.

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