

Wheelersburg Baptist Church 6/26/11
John 7:37-53 “An Invitation to Thirsty People”**

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Main Idea: In John 7:37-53 Jesus finished His ministry at the Feast of Tabernacles by making an incredible offer to the people and then receiving an incredible response.

I. Jesus gave a life-changing invitation (37-39).

- A. The extent is universal (37).
 - 1. Jesus invites everyone to come to Him.
 - 2. The only requirement is an admission of need.
- B. The offer is highly personal (38a).
 - 1. Jesus offers Himself to individuals.
 - 2. Jesus points to the Scriptures for support.
- C. The result is lasting satisfaction (38b).
 - 1. It starts in the person who believes.
 - 2. It spills over and refreshes others too.
- D. The explanation is the work of the Holy Spirit (39).
 - 1. When Jesus finished His work, the Spirit came to do His work.
 - 2. If a person believes in Jesus, that person receives the Spirit.

II. Jesus faced a mixed response (40-53).

- A. The people in the crowd were divided (40-44).
- B. The temple guards were impressed (45-46).
- C. The Pharisees were flat out opposed (47-49).
- D. Nicodemus gave evidence that the Spirit was working in him (50-53).
 - 1. He was willing to stand up for Jesus.
 - 2. He wanted to know more.
 - 3. He faced ridicule.

Make It Personal: The offer still stands.

- 1. Are you thirsty?
- 2. Do you know thirsty people?

About three weeks ago I met a German man on top of a tenth century castle wall in Caen, France. The man heard me speaking in English, so he initiated the conversation. We chatted about our backgrounds and why we were in Normandy. He was heading to the soldiers' cemeteries that week. So were we. I later found out that not only is there an amazing American cemetery there, where 10,000 American soldiers are buried who gave their lives for their country on D-Day in 1944, but there's also a German cemetery with more than 20,000 dead.

I assume he had a loved one buried in the German cemetery. He didn't say, but he did want to try out his English with small talk. Finally I asked him if he went to church. He sort of chuckled, and then dismissed the subject by talking about the emptiness of religion and then saying, "I am my own god."

Jamel, our French pastor friend who was showing Sherry and me the country, quickly responded, "It's not about religion. It's about truth. And if you want to know the truth, you must know Jesus Christ who said He is the truth."

I gave the man my card with my email address, but haven't heard from him since. His wife actually rolled her eyes when she looked at my card and heard him explain, "He's a pastor from a Baptist Church." The man just smiled, shook our hands, and parted company.

Why is it that people will talk about their jobs, their countries, their ancestors, their kids, their friends—all of which came up in the ten minute conversation we had that day—but mention the subject of God, and namely, His Son Jesus Christ, and the conversation often starts to nose-dive?

It's nothing new. Jesus Himself faced the same response, as we'll see in today's text.

**Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

The most important question in all of life is this question. *What am I going to do with Jesus Christ?* God so loved the world that sent His only Son into the world. Now what am I going to do with Him?

Some are scared to death of the question, so they turn to religion. Others quickly fill with rage when it confronts them. Still others do all they can to avoid it, though not really sure why. And still others, with hearts prepared by the Spirit of God Himself, begin to love the question and then search for its answer as for a treasure in a hidden field.

We've come today to the end of John 7. The setting for John 7 is the Jewish Feast of Tabernacles. Jesus is six months away from the cross when He makes this trip to Jerusalem, walking right into the lion's den, as it were.

Verse 37 begins, "On the last and greatest day of the Feast." The Feast of Tabernacles, also known as The Feast of Booths, was one of Israel's three great festivals. Every adult male within fifteen miles of Jerusalem had to go to the Temple for Passover (in March/April), for the Festival of Pentecost (in early June), and the Feast of Tabernacles (in October). During the Feast of Tabernacles, the people commemorated God's delivering their ancestors from bondage in Egypt and taking them through the wilderness to the Promised Land by living in temporary huts or "booths." The Feast was also a harvest festival, sort of like our Thanksgiving.

It lasted seven days. Jesus didn't make Himself public at the Feast until the mid-point, says verse 14, when He began to teach the crowds. As you scan through verses 14-36, you see that His teaching amazed the crowd and offended not a few, especially the religious leaders. He told them in verses 33-34, "I am with you for only a short time, and then I go to the one who sent me. You will look for me, but you will not find me; and where I am, you cannot come."

Three, maybe four, days passed, and then Jesus addressed the crowd again, on the final day of the Feast. That's our text. In John 7:37-53 Jesus finished His ministry at the Feast of Tabernacles by making an incredible offer to the people and then receiving an incredible response.

I. Jesus gave a life-changing invitation (37-39).

Notice verse 37, "On the last and greatest day of the Feast, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, 'If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.'"

He gave the invitation on *the last and greatest day*. That could refer either to the seventh day or the eighth day (on which the people met for a special final assembly; Lev. 23:36). Jesus stood, indicating this was important since rabbis often sat when they taught. And He spoke in a loud voice, so none would miss His offer.

If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. There's a backdrop to that offer. During the Feast of Tabernacles, there was a water ritual in the Feast and Jesus now uses it to teach about Himself. During each of the seven days, the priests did something with water to commemorate how the Lord provided water for Israel during their trip to the Promised Land. Each day the high priest would draw water from the pool at Siloam and then carry it in procession back to the temple. When they reached the Water Gate (near the temple court), a shofar sounded three blasts to sound the joy of the occasion. The priests recited Isaiah 12:3, "With joy you will draw water from the wells of salvation." Then once inside the temple the priests marched around the altar and the temple choir sang the Hallel psalms (Psalms 113-118). Then the priests poured out the water as an offering to God while the people celebrated His goodness.¹

¹ I appreciate John MacArthur's helpful explanation of this process; p. 312.

That's the backdrop for Jesus' invitation in John 7. Now let's make four observations about this invitation.

A. The extent is universal (37). "If anyone is thirsty," says Jesus. Don't miss it.

1. *Jesus invites everyone to come to Him.* Religious leaders and common people alike. Wealthy and poor. Male and female. Adults and children. Those viewed highly by the public and those who've been an embarrassment to society. He extends this invitation to *anyone*.

2. *The only requirement is an admission of need.* You have to be *thirsty*. To the crowd in chapter six, He offered the bread of life, and the only requirement? Hunger. "I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty (John 6:35)."

But hunger and thirst for what? Fame? Success? Money? Is that it? No. "Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness," said Jesus elsewhere in the Sermon on the Mount, "for they will be filled (Matt. 5:6)."

That's a sinner's greatest need, not money, not fame, not health, but *righteousness*. He needs to attain God's righteousness standard. And Jesus extends this offer to all who admit that's what they need. It's a universal offer. There's not a person in the universe exempt from this offer.

B. The offer is highly personal (38a). "Let *him* come to *me*," says Jesus in verse 37. This is a person coming to a person. A parent can't do it for a child, nor a friend for a friend. The person who senses his need must come to the One who alone can meet that need. Jesus underscores the same thought in verse 38, "Whoever believes in me." So...

1. *Jesus offers Himself to individuals.* He's looking into the eyes of the people that comprised the crowd that day. He's looking at you right now, too, for His offer stands. Verse 37—"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink." And verse 38—"Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him." Notice that...

2. *Jesus points to the Scriptures for support.* "As the Scripture has said." But which Scripture does He mean? It's hard to say, since He's not actually quoting a verse. But you can be sure the people knew, for first century Jews knew their Bible. For instance, they knew that both Jeremiah and Zechariah talked about the Lord being the source of living water...

Jeremiah 2:13 "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."

Jeremiah 17:13 "O LORD, the hope of Israel, all who forsake you will be put to shame. Those who turn away from you will be written in the dust because they have forsaken the LORD, the **spring of living water**."

Zechariah 14:8 "On that day **living water** will flow out from Jerusalem..."

There's actually a prophecy being fulfilled here. About 550 years before Jesus offered this invitation, the prophet Haggai encouraged God's people to get to work on rebuilding the temple, which was in shambles. Knowing some were discouraged because they remembered the glory days of the previous temple, Haggai told them that the best was yet to come. He told them what the Lord says He was going to do with this temple in the future (Haggai 2:6-9):

"This is what the LORD Almighty says: 'In a little while I will once more shake the heavens and the earth, the sea and the dry land. I will shake all nations, and the desired of all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory,' says the LORD Almighty. 'The silver is mine and the gold is mine,' declares the LORD Almighty. 'The glory of this present house will be greater than the glory of the former house,' says the LORD Almighty. 'And in this place I will grant peace,' declares the LORD Almighty."

Here's the interesting part. Haggai delivered that prophetic message on the *twenty-first day of the seventh month* (2:1), the final day of the Feast of Tabernacles. Coincidental? Jesus stood in that same temple and offered this incredible invitation on what day? On the same day, the final day of the Feast of Tabernacles.²

A third observation about Jesus' invitation...

C. The result is lasting satisfaction (38b). "Whoever believes in me...streams of living water will flow from within him." What's the result of believing in Jesus? He says something will happen to that person. Streams of living water will flow from within him.

Sounds sort of like what Jesus told the woman at the well, doesn't it? To a woman who'd been looking for satisfaction in all the wrong places and had a track record of five failed marriages to show for it, Jesus made this incredible offer in John 4:14, "Whoever drinks the water I give him will never thirst. Indeed, the water I give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life."

Now Jesus offers the same satisfaction to all in John 7. What's true of this satisfaction?

1. *It starts in the person who believes.* "Whoever believes" will experience the wonder of this living water. That's the person who will taste it as it begins flowing from within him. This satisfaction works inside-out, and it works that way for the person who believes, and specifically, who believes *in Jesus*.

But it doesn't end there. What happens to it?

2. *It spills over and refreshes others too.* It's like an artesian spring. The fresh fluids come from deep in the earth and keep filling the pool so others can enjoy its satisfaction. So Jesus says that the one who believes in Him will discover living water beginning to flow "from within him." What's that mean? If it's flowing from within him, it means it's going out, right? It means what he has come to enjoy, he will begin to share with others.

By contrast, Leon Morris refers to "the piety of the pond," to talk about self-absorbed religion. That's not what Christianity is supposed to be. If you are a Christian, you have received a gift that the Giver intends you share with others. And as you share this living water, it's instantly replaced with a fresh supply. Share and be filled again. Share and be filled again. That's what happens to the thirsty person who comes to Jesus for a drink. That's what Jesus offers, *lasting satisfaction*.

Okay, Jesus is obviously using figurative language here. He's not talking about literal water. What is He talking about? In verse 39, John, who's writing this Gospel account sixty years after the fact, tells us. He says...

D. The explanation is the work of the Holy Spirit (39). "By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive. Up to that time the Spirit had not been given, since Jesus had not yet been glorified."

Don't misunderstand. It's not that the Holy Spirit was not active in the Old Testament, for He was. He was active in creation (Gen. 1:2). He was active in regenerating lost people (see John 3:6 which is pre-Pentecost). So John doesn't mean that the Spirit didn't work pre-Christ.

However, something drastic did take place just weeks after Jesus conquered the grave. The Sovereign Lord gave His newly found church a birthday present in Acts 2, the Holy Spirit Himself, and in so doing inaugurated the age and era of the Spirit. So while the Spirit was certainly not *inactive* in the old covenant, His role ramped to a new height in this new covenant age in which we live.

² Observation by William Hendriksen, p. 23.

And Jesus made it happen. This is Jesus' invitation—"Come to me, believe in me, and streams of living water will flow from within." He's talking about what the Spirit will do, but the focus isn't on the Spirit. It's on Jesus. John identifies the Spirit's coming with Jesus' glorification. It's Jesus' work that resulted in the Spirit's present ministry. Indeed, the Spirit came to exalt Jesus, not Himself. "He will glorify me," said Jesus regarding the Spirit in John 16:14.

And that's exactly what happened.

1. *When Jesus finished His work, the Spirit came to do His work.* On the day of Pentecost, two thousand years ago, the Holy Spirit came and began causing people to experience the life-changing presence of Jesus Christ Himself. You say, "How can I experience it?" It's not complicated, for...

2. *If a person believes in Jesus, that person receives the Spirit.* That's Jesus' promise. Believe in me, and the living water will start flowing inside out, and you'll never be barren again, for His Spirit will be with you until He returns for you.

That's the invitation Jesus extended to the crowd that day. What happened? As is the case even today...

II. Jesus faced a mixed response (40-53).

John puts the spotlight on four different responders, starting with the common people, and then the leaders.

A. **The people in the crowd were divided (40-44).** That's what verse 43 says, "Thus the people were divided because of Jesus." There was conflicting opinion that day. Let's look back and we'll see the varied responses.

First, in verse 40, "On hearing his words, some of the people said, 'Surely this man is the Prophet.'" Moses wrote about The Prophet in Deuteronomy 18:15-18. Some Jews saw The Prophet as referring either to the Messiah Himself or as the forerunner to the Messiah. So this is a complimentary statement for Jesus. These individuals are saying publicly that they believe Jesus to be God-sent.

We hear another group in verse 41, "Others said, 'He is the Christ.'" They got it, didn't they? They affirm that Jesus is the anointed, God-sent Messiah that the prophets long predicted.

But their affirmation produced a stir in verses 42-43. "Still others asked, 'How can the Christ come from Galilee? Does not the Scripture say that the Christ will come from David's family and from Bethlehem, the town where David lived?' Thus the people were divided because of Jesus."

Of course, the problem is that they didn't do their homework. Jesus *did* come from Bethlehem—that's where He was born in fulfillment of Scripture (Micah 5:2). And He was most certainly a descendant of King David (Matt. 1:1; Luke 1:32; 3:23, 31). The people made a wrong assumption, namely that since Jesus grew up in Galilee, He lacked the messianic qualifications. But He lacked none of them. They just didn't check their sources.

Friends, what you don't know can hurt you. A lot of people have written off Jesus because they have imagined Him to be something He is not. Like my German friend in Caen. He has written off Jesus because He doesn't know the truth about Him. He sees Him merely as a man who started an outdated religion, and quite frankly, if that's who Jesus is, I wouldn't want you to believe in Him. But that's not who He is.

If you've put Jesus on the back shelf, I urge you, *do your homework*. Start reading His biography that John wrote, and find out who He is, who He *really* is. And then you'll see, as millions have, why you can and must take His invitation seriously.

If you are thirsty, come to me, and living water will flow from within you.

Unfortunately, it started to turn ugly in the temple courts. Verse 44 says, "Some wanted to seize him, but no one laid a hand on him." It's unthinkable, isn't it? Why did the people want to seize Him? Was He a terrorist and a threat to their safety? No. Because He said He could give them what their souls desperately needed.

So that's the response of the common people in the crowd. They were divided. Next we meet the temple guards. What did they think of Jesus?

B. The temple guards were impressed (45-46). Listen to the dialogue that begins in verses 45-46, "Finally the temple guards [ESV & KJV 'the officers'] went back to the chief priests and Pharisees, who asked them, 'Why didn't you bring him in?' 'No one ever spoke the way this man does,' the guards declared."

Back in verse 32 the chief priests and Pharisees sent the temple guards to arrest Jesus. That was their job. But they didn't do it. They get to Jesus and start listening. Don't miss what caught their attention, not Jesus' miracles but His *teaching*. They're impressed by what they hear coming from Jesus' lips. His teaching is unique, authoritative, and hope-giving.

So they return to headquarters empty-handed. "Where is He? Why didn't you do your job?" asked the religious authorities. "Ummm. Are you sure you've got the right man? We're never heard anybody teach like Him." Which, of course, produced the furious response of the Pharisees. And what did they do with Jesus' invitation?

C. The Pharisees were flat out opposed (47-49). "You mean he has deceived you also?" the Pharisees retorted. 'Has any of the rulers or of the Pharisees believed in him? No! But this mob that knows nothing of the law—there is a curse on them.'"

Notice the Pharisees do the talking, not the chief priests. The chief priests have the clout, but the Pharisees are the Bible scholars. The Pharisees see Jesus as a threat, so they pull out their Bible-guns and start firing.

First, they insult the intelligence of the guards. *You mean he has deceived you also, like he did the uneducated masses? You should be ashamed!*

Then they cite the highest authority they can think of, *themselves*. *Have any of the rulers or Pharisees believed in him? No!*

I heard Josh Harris, a pastor and author in Maryland, use the phrase "humble orthodoxy." Just because you know the truth doesn't give you the right to be pious and proud. If we know the truth, it's because of God's grace, not our intelligence. Hence, *humble* orthodoxy.

Proud orthodoxy is repulsive. Just look at it here. Look at the Pharisees. These are Bible experts, and not only are they opposing Jesus but they're demanding that others do the same. *Has any of the rulers or Pharisees believed in him?*

They're about to get some egg on their face, aren't they? In point of fact, there is one from their own number who doesn't buy their opinion of Jesus.

We're introduced to him in verses 50-51. "Nicodemus, who had gone to Jesus earlier and who was one of their own number, asked, 'Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him to find out what he is doing?'"

So here is one of their own number. We met him back in chapter 3 and learned that Nicodemus was "a man of the Pharisees" and "a member of the ruling council" (3:1). He came to Jesus at night, probably to hide from his peers his interest in this controversial figure, Jesus.

Remember what Jesus told him? “No one can see the kingdom unless he is born again, unless he is born of water and the Spirit.”

No doubt Nicodemus couldn’t shake that thought. Jesus told him that he needed God’s Spirit to do something for him that he couldn’t do for himself, to give him a new heart. He’s been pondering that for months now. And then either he hears personally, or hears the report of it, as Jesus announced, “Whoever believes in me, streams of living water will flow from within him.”

I’m not sure if Nicodemus is a born again man in John 7, not yet. He will be by the third time we meet him in John’s Gospel, for he assisted in Jesus’ burial (John 19:39). But I do know this. At the end of John 7...

D. Nicodemus gave evidence that the Spirit was working in him (50-53). What’s the evidence? Three things.

1. *He was willing to stand up for Jesus.* “Does our law condemn anyone without first hearing him?” Interesting, isn’t it? The Pharisees just condemned the crowds for not knowing the Law, but now Nicodemus reminds them that they are disobeying the same Law in condemning a man without proper investigation. That’s risky business, to stand up for a man the authorities have concluded deserves to be killed. But it’s the kind of evidence you see in a person when the living water of the Spirit is starting to well up in his soul. And so is this.

2. *He wanted to know more.* He wants to “find out what he is doing.” That’s what he told his peers. Let’s check out Jesus. He deserves a hearing. I want to give Him a hearing. And here’s a third evidence...

3. *He faced ridicule.* Not everybody was happy about his proposal, particularly his fellow Pharisees, who began to attack him in verse 52. “They replied, ‘Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee.’”

Of course, once again, these Bible scholars reveal they don’t know their Bibles as well as they want you to think. The truth is, Jonah was from Galilee, and quite possibly other prophets were too, such as Nahum and Hosea. But that didn’t matter to these men. End of conversation.

“Then each went to his own home,” concludes John in verse 53.

Now step back and take another look. What have we seen? We’ve just seen Jesus extend an amazing, life-changing invitation, and we’ve just seen an assortment of responses to that invitation. So what’s the point? Why did John the apostle record both Jesus’ offer and the mixed response of the crowd? It’s not a history lesson. There’s something here for us, whether sixty years removed in the day John wrote this Gospel, or nearly two thousand years removed in our day.

Here’s why. *The offer still stands.*

Make It Personal: The offer still stands.

In his children’s novel *The Silver Chair*, C. S. Lewis writes of a scene where Jill sees a lion, is scared to death, and runs into the forest. In her fear she runs herself to the point of exhaustion and thinks she’s about to die of thirst. It’s then she hears the gurgling of a brook in the distance. She heads for the brook when all of a sudden she sees on the grass before her the same lion.

“Are you not thirsty?” said the Lion.

“I’m dying of thirst,” said Jill.

“Then drink,” said the Lion.

“May I – could I – would you mind going away while I do?” said Jill.

The Lion answered this only by a look and a very low growl. And as Jill gazed at its motionless bulk, she realized that she might as well have asked the whole mountain to move

aside for her convenience. The delicious rippling noise of the stream was driving her nearly frantic.

“Will you promise not to – do anything to me, if I do come?” said Jill.

“I make no promise,” said the Lion.

Jill was so thirsty now that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer.

“Do you eat girls?” she said.

“I have swallowed up girls and boys, women and men, kings and emperors, cities and realms,” said the Lion. It didn’t say this as if it were boasting, nor as if it were sorry, nor as if it were angry. It just said it.

“I daren’t come and drink,” said Jill.

“Then you will die of thirst,” said the Lion.

“Oh dear!” said Jill, coming another step nearer.

“I suppose I must go and look for another stream then.”

“There is no other stream,” said the Lion.

It never occurred to Jill to disbelieve the Lion – no one who had ever seen his stern face could do that – and her mind suddenly made itself up. It was the worst thing she had ever had to do, but she went forward to the stream, knelt down, and began scooping up water in her hand. It was the coldest, most refreshing water she had ever tasted.³

I have two questions for you as we close...

1. *Are you thirsty?* Are you tired of living with a sin-parched, dried out soul? Friends, that’s what sin does. The consequence of sin is that it saps the soul, and more sin just makes us thirstier.

The offer still stands. “If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, streams of living water will flow from within him.” Are you thirsty? Come to Jesus. Come to Him for salvation. Then come to Him every day and let Him do what He alone can do, *satisfy your soul*.

But don’t hoard what He gives you. Remember His words. *Streams of living water will flow from within him.* What’s that mean? He wants us to share what we enjoy. So answer this.

2. *Do you know thirsty people?* Neighbors? Kids on your ball-team? Relatives? If they’re thirsty, it’s because they need what we have. Let’s share our Savior with them!

³ C. S. Lewis, *The Silver Chair*, quotation of the story taken from Kent Hughes, *John*, pp. 216-7.