

Thirsty for God

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John 7:37-39

Sermons Series:
In Christ Together
for the World

“Trying to become the person we were meant to be by our own efforts alone is like trying to ski behind a rowboat.”

- John Ortberg

We’re inviting everyone in this church this fall to read John Ortberg’s book, *The Me I Want to Be*. Our hope is that each of us will discover the “me” God wants us to be so we can be the church God wants us to increasingly become.

John Ortberg writes about learning to water ski on vacation one summer. John’s wife, Nancy, a veteran water skier, has the honor of teaching John how to ski. He masters, in short order, skiing on two skis, so he graduates to a single ski. Unfortunately, the motor boat they’re using can’t generate enough power to pull John out of the water. John notices on the boat’s dashboard a button labeled power-tilt. John knows nothing about motor boats but thinks this button sounds promising. This is the point in the story where I become engaged. Pushing a power tilt button sounds like something I would try.

John positions himself behind the boat on a single ski and yells to Nancy, “Hit it.” That’s her signal to push the power tilt button. The power button has the effect of driving the propeller deeper into the water for extra thrust, thereby

lifting the boat out of the water at a 45-degree angle. John lunges forward as though he has been shot from a cannon. John gestures wildly for the boat to slow down, but his kids driving the boat interpret it as a signal to go faster. So, they rev the engine full throttle and now John is bouncing across the water like you might skip a rock across a lake. Somehow it doesn’t occur to John to let go of the rope. Eventually, John loses his balance and lands on his face. For six months, John could not smile out of the right side of his mouth.

John concludes, “Trying to become the person we were meant to be by our own efforts alone is like trying to ski behind a rowboat. We need a power tilt for the soul. Where do we look?” he asks.

Ortberg turns to the passage read a few moments ago (John 7:37-39). The setting for this passage, verse 37, is the last, great day of a festival. If we trace back to verse 2, we learn that Jesus and his disciples are attending the Festival of Booths, sometimes called the Feast of Tabernacles. Old Testament believers observed three major festivals each year: the feast of Passover (Pesach) in the spring, the feast of

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Pentecost (Shavuot) in early summer and the feast of Booths (Sukkoth) in the fall. These festivals align closely with the agricultural year: with seed planting in spring (Passover), with grain ripening in summer (Pentecost) and with the fall harvest (Booths).

My son, Andrew, asked me Friday about the subject of today's sermon. "I'm preaching on the Feast of Booths," I told him. He looked at me with a quizzical expression. He thought I said the Feast of Booze. It's called the Festival of Booths because people moved out of their homes into temporary shelters, lean-tos, if you will, for the duration of this seven-day feast. Living in booths commemorated Israel's 40-year sojourn in the wilderness, when they lived in temporary quarters.

The primary images utilized during this festival are water (chapter 7) and light (chapter 8). Each morning, priests would process to the Pool of Siloam to fill golden jars with water. The jars were ceremoniously carried to the temple and poured on the altar as a drink offering. Water in this desert region was a valuable commodity for people's crops and livelihood. This water also recalls Moses' act of striking a rock in the wilderness to quench people's thirst (Exodus 17:1-7).

On the last day of the festival, perhaps as the water is being poured upon the altar, Jesus

addresses the crowd: "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me 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'" (7:37-38).

Bold move, Jesus! It's a preposterous claim, the kind of statement that led C.S. Lewis to contend that either Jesus is who he says he is or he is a lunatic—on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg.

Jesus said, "Out of the believer's heart will flow rivers of living water." Living water represents flowing, running water. Rivers flow while pools stagnate.

Rivers play a vital role in Scripture. There are four rivers that water the Garden of Eden in Genesis (2:10-14). Jesus is baptized in the river Jordan. The book of Revelation depicts a new heaven and a new earth that will be replenished by a river that will give life to the tree of life (22:3).

I might have expected Jesus to say that into our hearts will flow rivers of living water. Instead, he says that rivers of living water will flow out of us so that those who live farther downstream can benefit also. Jesus wants to flood the whole world with his life and power.

Jesus likens this river of living water to the Holy Spirit in verse 39. This third member of the Trinity confuses people, Christians included. We

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understand something of God the Father and Jesus the Son, but who exactly is God the Holy Spirit? The term, Holy Ghost, further confounds us. The Holy Spirit is none other than the presence of God the Father and Jesus the Son that takes up residence in every believer. When Jesus ascended to the right hand of God the Father, he sent his presence, the Holy Spirit, to live inside of us.

“Where is the power?” Ortberg asks. The Holy Spirit provides the power.

So what difference does this sermon make in my life?

Maybe your spiritual life seems stagnant right now. Your soul feels as dry as dust. There are no rivers of living water flowing in or out of your life. Your enthusiasm for living the Christian life has slowed to a trickle.

Perhaps you're living in a desert right now. Reading the Bible holds no appeal. God seems distant. Prayer seems pointless. Christians annoy you.

Jesus invites us: “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me.” Let the rivers of Jesus' life flow into your parched souls. Let his presence flow through you. Come into my life, Jesus. Live in me. Flow through me. Revive me again.

Jesus is not asking you to try harder. Quite the reverse. Ortberg urges us “to try softer.” Trying softer means we focus more on God's goodness than our own efforts.

Some things in life are helped by trying harder. Yet, there are limits to what we can accomplish. Some things are actually aggravated by trying harder.

Take sleeping. We're not successful at sleeping by trying harder. Maybe you've had the experience of saying to yourself as you lie in bed, “I've got to get to sleep. If I don't get a good night's sleep, I'll be worthless tomorrow.” So, you lie in bed obsessing over not falling asleep.

For me, it's the worst Saturday night, knowing I have to preach three times in quick succession the next morning. No amount of trying helps me fall asleep.

No amount of trying helps us fall asleep. In fact, sleep experts tell us that the harder we try to fall asleep, the harder it is to fall asleep. Trying harder only increases our level of anxiety and frustration.

The key to falling asleep is relaxation. We try softer, not harder. I limit my TV viewing at night, since television often acts as a stimulant. I try to center my bedtime ritual in prayer. God, I give you my worries, my failures, my accomplishments. I'm not going to worry about things for which I can trust you. Psalm 4:8 has become my bedtime mantra: “I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me lie down in safety.”

Don't look for satisfaction in things that will not satisfy.

Don't push the river. Get in the flow. Relax and trust the river.

I don't mean to imply there is nothing we can do to help us grow in faith. We devoted this past spring and summer to preaching the classic practices of the Christian life that help us grow in faith. There are things we can do, but there are also things we can't do. We can't make ourselves grow. So we relax in God's love. We trust God's goodness more than relying on our efforts.

"Let anyone who is thirsty, come to me." You may think your thirst will be assuaged by getting into the college of your choice, a romantic relationship, a good job, more money, a bigger house. These things are only a mirage. They appear inviting. But on closer inspection, they fail to quench your spiritual thirst. Don't look for satisfaction in things that will not satisfy.

The Silver Chair is the fourth book in the fabled *The Chronicles of Narnia* series. In our story, Jill is in search of a land called Narnia. She had heard of a noble Lion called Aslan, who serves in C.S. Lewis's novels as a Christ figure. In her quest for Narnia, she becomes thirsty and comes upon a mountain stream. She would have rushed forward to drink, had it not been for the Lion on the other side of the stream. "If you are thirsty, you may drink," the Lion said. She remembered what her friend

had said about talking animals in the land of Narnia.

"Are you not thirsty?" said the Lion.

"I'm dying of thirst," said Jill.

"Would you mind going away while I drink?" she asked the Lion. 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?" she continued.

"I make no promise," said the Lion. Jill was now so thirsty that, without noticing it, she had come a step nearer.

"Do you eat girls?" She asked.

"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 dare not 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. You'll have to read the rest of the story to find out what happens next!

We are thirsty, all right. We are thirsty for God. Aslan is right, "There is no other stream." Come to Jesus. "Let anyone who is thirsty, come to me."

