JESUS GIVES RIVERS OF LIVING WATER

John 7:1–52

Key Verse: 7:38

“Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.”

Have you ever felt dissatisfied or empty? Most of us have. On the other hand, have you ever misunderstood someone? Today’s passage links these two things: inner satisfaction, and, understanding. It’s so interesting. At first they seem different, but really they’re closely related. If we’re unfulfilled, we find it hard to understand things. On the other hand, if we’re deeply satisfied in our souls, we can understand better. Today Jesus offers something that can give us both deep satisfaction and discernment. What is it? He says it’s rivers of living water within us. May God open our hearts and help us accept his invitation.

Look at verse 1. Why was Jesus avoiding Judea? It says the Jewish leaders there were trying to kill him. It’s repeated in this passage several times (19,20,25). Why were the leaders trying to kill him? Back in chapter 5 Jesus had healed an invalid man on the Sabbath. The Jewish leaders considered it working on the Sabbath. What really bothered them was that he called God his Father. Jesus told them, “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working” (5:17). 5:18 says, “For this reason they tried all the more to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.” They thought Jesus was a blasphemer and a dangerous heretic who would mislead people. Their real problem was that they were too proud and legalistic to learn from him. Jesus stayed away from these leaders so that he could continue to do the ministry God gave him to do.

Read verses 2–4. John uniquely tells us about Jesus’ brothers. They push Jesus to go to Judea to show people “his works,” meaning his miracles. They think Jesus is trying to make himself a public figure. And they think doing this at one of the major Jewish holidays, the Feast of Tabernacles, when everybody would be in Jerusalem, would be a great time to do it. They think they know Jesus and what he’s trying to do. But read verse 5. The word “even” here stands out. As his brothers, they had been close to Jesus his whole life. The problem was, they saw him humanly. It made them blind spiritually. They misunderstood who he was and what he had come to do. Jesus was way more than their human brother; he was God’s Son. And Jesus did not come to win a popularity contest and be elected a leader; he came to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world (1:29). When we focus on the human elements in the people who are trying to serve God, we too can become spiritually blind.

What did Jesus say to his brothers? Read verses 6–8. Jesus and his brothers have the same mother, but they’re quite different. How so? One reason is that Jesus is hated by the world, whereas his brothers are not hated. Why is Jesus hated? He says it’s because he testifies that what people are doing is evil. It implies that people don’t realize how evil what they are doing is.

We should think for a moment about what this evil is. It’s not just blatantly wicked things like murder or immorality. Evil starts with not glorifying God as God nor giving thanks to him (Ro1:21). To us it may not seem so evil not to glorify God nor give thanks to him. But actually, it’s so evil because God is our Creator. God reveals his glory in all creation. Without him we wouldn’t even be alive. As his creatures we should be giving all glory and thanks to him every day of our lives. But we don’t. We live for ourselves. We try to glorify ourselves. We’re ungrateful and take all that God does for us for granted. Jesus came not just to give us good feelings; he came to call us to repent. To do that, we have to see how evil what we’re doing really is. It’s hard to see it, and hard to show it to others. Like Jesus’ brothers, most people don’t feel comfortable doing that. But Jesus had the courage to do it. And because of it, he was hated (cf. 3:19,20).

Jesus is also different from his brothers, he says, because he’s on a different time schedule. He says, “for you any time will do.” It means they can do whatever they want, whenever they want. But Jesus doesn’t have such freedom. Why? It’s because he’s on a mission from God. His mother once pushed him to do a miracle (2:3,4); now his brothers push him, too. But Jesus is carefully following how his Father God is leading him. He’s waiting for God’s right time for him to say or do anything. His time is ultimately the time for him to obey God’s will and be crucified on a cross. If we’re going to follow Jesus, we need to learn how to live like him, sensitive to God’s timing, to what God wants.

Look at verses 9,10. Jesus went to Jerusalem later, without his brothers, in secret. He purposely was not drawing attention to himself. Why? Look at verse 11. Partly it was because these Jewish leaders were watching for him, and trying to catch him. Look at verses 12,13. Some people thought Jesus was a good man; others thought he was a deceiver. And those who liked him were afraid of taking a stand because they knew the religious leaders didn’t like him. In this climate, Jesus had to be careful what he was doing. But this situation also shows us how superficial people’s understanding of Jesus was. Look at verse 14. At this festival Jesus didn’t do any miracles; he focused on teaching. It was through teaching God’s word that people’s understanding of him could deepen. Look at verse 15. These Jews might have been ordinary people in the crowd, or they might have been the leaders. But like Jesus’ brothers, they saw Jesus from a human point of view. They knew he had not been trained by the leading rabbis of the day. Yet they were amazed at his learning. They were amazed at the depth of his understanding of God’s word. Jesus was trying to help people go deeper, and they knew what he was saying was deep, but instead of going there, they reverted to looking at Jesus humanly. Basically they didn’t want to commit.

What did Jesus say to them? Read verses 16–18. Jesus is trying to draw people not to himself, but to God. He’s contrasting human teaching versus God’s teaching. Human teaching is usually motivated by self-glory. God’s teaching is for God’s glory, to turn people to him. There are all kinds of teachers in the world, many of them with legitimate degrees from respected institutions, but Jesus is saying not all teachers can be trusted. We need discernment. How can we tell who to trust as our spiritual teacher? Jesus says we first need to “choose to do Gods will.” It means we first need to make a full commitment to God, to obeying him no matter what. Without such a commitment, no amount of teaching can actually help us. Spiritual understanding comes from obedience, not from head knowledge. Later Jesus promises that if we obey him, he’ll give us the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of truth, to live in us (14:15–21).

Look at verse 19. Jesus, the man of truth, testifies that what they are doing is evil—they’re trying to kill him, breaking God’s law (Ex20:13). But in response, they accuse him of having a demon (20). Look at verses 21–23. Jesus is referring here to his healing of the invalid man on the Sabbath. The Jews would circumcise newborn baby boys if the eighth day after their birth happened to be on a Sabbath. But they condemned Jesus for healing a man’s whole body on the Sabbath. It made no sense. Read verse 24. How easy it is to judge based on mere appearances! People look good, so we think they’re good. People look bad, so we think they’re bad. But looks can be so deceiving. To judge correctly, we need to know the truth. We need discernment. We need the Holy Spirit.

Look at verse 25. It’s funny; earlier they denied trying to kill Jesus, but here, they know the leaders are trying to kill Jesus. Look at verses 26,27. These people of Jerusalem seem to wish the religious leaders would arrest Jesus. They say here that they don’t know where he is from. It implies that if they knew he was from Judea or Jerusalem, they would accept him. Again, they wanted to accept Jesus based on human standards, not on truth. Look at verses 28,29. These people think they know Jesus, but they don’t. Their real problem is that they don’t know God, who sent him. It tells us that to believe in Jesus, we especially need to know that God sent him (16,18,28,29,33). We shouldn’t focus on other things; knowing that God sent him should be enough for us. What happened? Look at verse 30. Some tried to seize Jesus, but God somehow prevented it from happening. Look at verse 31. Many in the crowd believed in him based at least on his miracles. Look at verse 32. The religious leaders were super sensitive to popularity and public opinion, so they moved quickly to arrest Jesus. Sadly, they were not sensitive to God or to his truth. There’s yet another misunderstanding. Read verses 33,34. Jesus didn’t have forever to help these people believe (cf. 12:35,36a). But they think he’s talking about going to live among the Jews scattered and living among the Greeks (35,36). It’s ironic, because eventually, when the Jews rejected Jesus the gospel actually spread among these Greek-speaking Jews, and through them, to the whole Gentile world (cf. 12:20,21).

Look at verse 37. Now it’s the last and greatest day of the festival. On this day there was a great water-pouring ceremony to commemorate how God had provided for his people’s thirst while they were wandering in the wilderness. The Jews were fixated on keeping their traditional holiday ritual, but they didn’t know what it really pointed to. It actually pointed to Jesus. Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.” No ceremony really satisfy people’s thirst. He wasn’t talking about just physical thirst. Who is thirsty spiritually? We all are. What does it mean to be thirsty spiritually? It means to be longing for meaning, for satisfaction, and ultimately, to really be longing for God. Jesus promised earlier that if we come to him, we’ll never go hungry or thirsty (6:35). He connects us to God in the deepest way possible. Only a real and living relationship with God can satisfy our souls.

And Jesus doesn’t just barely satisfy us. Read verse 38. It’s way more than just personal satisfaction. Jesus promises “rivers of living water.” He spoke about this earlier with the thirsty Samaritan woman. That lady had tried to quench her thirsty soul through the love of men. But she ran through one man after another and after six of them was still so thirsty. Jesus told her he would give her a spring of water so that she would never be thirsty again. Now, he promises all those who believe in him “rivers of living water.” These rivers are abundant and constantly flowing, maybe even overflowing. What did Jesus mean? Read verse 39. God withheld giving the Spirit until after Jesus had been “glorified,” meaning until after his death and resurrection. Through his death and resurrection, our problem of sin, our broken relationship with God, was solved. Now, if we repent and believe in Jesus, we receive the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit (Ac2:38). The Holy Spirit quenches our inner thirst like nothing and no one in this world ever could. The Holy Spirit lives in us. He makes us aware of God’s own presence with us. He gives us a deep knowledge of God and of the deep things of God (1Co2:10). The Holy Spirit fills us with the love of God, the word of God, and God’s peace, and we’re abundantly satisfied. When he fills us, we have keen spiritual understanding and discernment. We can discern God’s mission for us, God’s timing for us, God’s teachers sent to us, and we can see through all kinds of confusion of this world and know the truth. All we have to do is open our hearts to Jesus’ invitation and believe in him.

Look at verses 40–44. On hearing his words, some people accepted them and grew in faith. Others held onto their fixed ideas. Still others remained angry. John concludes with a brief story to show us what it means to believe, and why the religious leaders didn’t. Look at verses 45,46. Earlier the chief priests and Pharisees sent temple guards to arrest Jesus. These guards surely didn’t intend to believe, but Jesus’ words moved their hearts. The religious leaders thought they had a monopoly on spiritual authority. They tried to use the crowd for their own glory, but in fact despised them (49). Look at verses 50–52. Nicodemus had come to Jesus earlier but didn’t understand what he was saying. But now he’s growing in spiritual discernment and tries to defend Jesus. On the other hand, the religious leaders reject Jesus because of his Galilean background.

Read verse 38 again. May God help us believe in Jesus and have rivers of living water within us. May he give us the deepest spiritual satisfaction and discernment so that we can follow Jesus in this confusing world and be a blessing to other thirsty people.