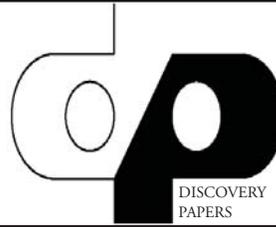


DESIRE OF THE CROSS

SERIES: SEVEN LAST WORDS



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Paul Taylor
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Think about this question for a moment: What do you want? What are some things you desire?

Desire is a powerful force in our lives. We all have desires. Some of them are very strong and can seem to control us. Some of them are weaker desires. Some of them we were born with. Some of them we were taught and picked up along the way. If you think about our day-to-day lives, so much of it is driven by our desires. I'm hungry. I'm thirsty. I want time alone. I want time with other people. I want this. I want that.

Last week we talked about pain. We saw how Jesus avoided two of the common temptations that we have toward pain. He didn't avoid it and he didn't ascend above it in an effort to pretend it didn't bother him. His path took him right through significant pain.

Today we'll see Jesus do something very similar with desire. These two messages go together. Pain and desire are like two sides of the same coin. Pain is the presence of something negative. Desire is the lack of something positive. Pain is bad stuff happening. Desire is good stuff we wish would happen. Pain and desire are two of the most powerful forces in our lives. They drive us to do all sorts of things.

The same is true for our Christian lives. I think it's fair to say that almost all of the bad choices we make in life are choices in response to either pain or desire. Many of the good ones are too. You might say that how we respond to pain and desire forms the heart of our character. If we can learn better patterns for responding to pain and desire, we can be very different people. How we respond to pain and desire is at the core of discipleship as a Christian.

Last week, we answered all the questions we could ever have about pain. This week, we'll do the same with desire. So after this message, we'll be all set.

We're in the fifth week of Lent, looking at the seven words that Jesus spoke from the cross. Our goal during this series has been to know more deeply what happened when Jesus died on the cross. Today we're looking at one of the simplest statements that Jesus made. He said, in what amounts to one word in Greek, "I am thirsty."

Again, on the surface, there's not too much to this. Jesus hadn't had a drink in a while, so he was thirsty. That makes sense. But as we think more about this statement, we realize that there might be a whole lot more to it. It turns out that thirst is a fairly prominent theme in Scripture. It turns out that the gospel of John, in particular, uses thirst in reference to some very specific ideas. So maybe when Jesus was thirsty at the end of his life—just as he's about to die—it wasn't just about a dry mouth. Maybe there's more to it.

As we look into this statement, we're going to see a lot of things. At first, we're going to see a man who is experiencing one of the most basic desires of the human condition: thirst. But at the same time, we'll see how remarkable it is that Jesus allowed himself to enter into desire. Then we'll think about why Jesus experienced desire and realize it had something to do with us. Finally, we'll think about ourselves and what Jesus' actions might inspire us to do as we relate to him and try to comprehend the cross. As we've done with many of these statements, we'll start at the top and go deeper and deeper into the rabbit hole.

Embrace Desire

Let's start by reading the account of this statement. It only occurs in the gospel of John and it takes place just moments before Jesus's death.

John 19:28-29:

²⁸Later, knowing that all was now completed, and so that the Scripture would be fulfilled, Jesus said, "I am thirsty."²⁹A jar of wine vinegar was there, so they soaked a sponge in it, put the sponge on a stalk of the hyssop plant, and lifted it to Jesus' lips.

There's a couple of interesting things going on here. John makes reference to the fact that what Jesus was doing on the cross fulfilled the Scripture about him. One possibility is that John is referring to Psalm 69:21, which reads, "They put gall in my food and gave me vinegar for my thirst." There are a few other places that John might be referring

to as well, including Psalm 22 from last week, where Jesus' statement of abandonment came from.

There seems to be some symbolism going on here as well. Hyssop plants were used to spread blood on the doorposts for the Passover Feast. As they lifted wine to Jesus' lips it would evoke a lot of similarity with lifting blood on a hyssop plant to the doorpost. The way John describes Jesus' actions are dripping with meaning.

But before we go into the deep stuff, we need to take this statement as a simple statement of thirst. Jesus was acting in a way that fulfilled the prophecies about him, but he wasn't just acting. We realized last week that Jesus actually felt pain. It's the same thing this week. He's not on the cross thinking, "Psalm 69 mentioned thirst, so I should say that 'I am thirsty' in order that my followers can later say that my actions fulfilled Scripture." Jesus was thirsty. It's as simple as that.

It's not surprising that Jesus was thirsty. He probably hadn't had a drink since the night before. Since then, he had been beaten, was suffering blood loss, and was completely exhausted. In fact, an Arab scribe who witnessed a crucifixion in the 13th century had this to say about the person who was dying, "His worst agony was thirst. An eyewitness told me that he looked constantly from side to side imploring someone to give him a little water."¹ So it makes sense that Jesus was thirsty.

But then it doesn't make any sense at all. Jesus was God. God is all-powerful. He is all-knowing. He is all-everything. God has it all, can do it all, and knows it all. Thirst is about needing something. Thirst is our most basic desire. What could God possibly desire? How could God want anything? He has everything. Desire implies something you want that you don't have. Doesn't God have everything?

These questions only get more complicated when you look at how Jesus talked about thirst in the gospel of John. John records Jesus speaking on the subject of thirst on three different occasions. Matthew, Mark, and Luke don't have a single reference to Jesus speaking about thirst in this way. John is unique. He seems especially concerned with how Jesus thinks about thirst.

In each of the three times that Jesus mentioned thirst throughout the gospel of John, he was claiming to be the one who could quench thirst. He offered an invitation to thirsty people to come to him and drink. Jesus first talked this way when he met a Samaritan woman by a well in John 4. He told her that whoever drank the water he gave

would never thirst again. Two chapters later in John 6, the day after he miraculously fed a huge crowd, he told them that whoever believed in him would never be thirsty again.

In his final mention of thirst, Jesus stood up in the middle of a crowd during the last day of one of Israel's three yearly festivals: the Feast of Tabernacles. He picked a time when the priest would customarily stand up with a bowl full of water and pour it on the base of the altar as a symbol of thanksgiving for the God who had provided his people water in the desert and water for their daily lives. Right at this moment, Jesus stood up and said this in John 7:37-38, "If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him."

Jesus invited thirsty people to come to him and he would quench their thirst. Not only that, he would make it so that they would never thirst again. Not only that, they would become a source of water for others. Jesus claimed to be the one person who could quench thirst for all time. Nobody has ever been able to solve that problem. Jesus said "I can."

So it really didn't make sense for this guy, at the end of his life, just before he succumbed to death to say, "I am thirsty." He's supposed to be the one who could quench thirst. How could he, himself, be thirsty? If you were following what Jesus claimed throughout the gospel of John, this statement sounds like an admission of failure. It sounds like Jesus admitted that this whole thing was just an act. He claimed to be able to quench thirst, but in the end, he's no different than the rest of us. He's thirsty, just like us.

Would you vote for a presidential candidate who promised to balance the budget, but then had to declare bankruptcy himself? Would you go to a barber who had terrible looking hair? Would you go to a personal trainer who weighed 400 pounds and shows up drinking a super big gulp the first time you meet him?

Do you see why the soldiers yelled at him, "If you are the king of the Jews, save yourself"? (Luke 23:37). Do you see why the one criminal insulted him, saying "Save yourself and us"? (Luke 23:39). What good is a Messiah who can't save himself? How can he possibly save anyone else? Who would believe in a thirsty God? Who needs a God like that?

So we have a man on a cross who was really thirsty. There are a ton of reasons why he might not say anything about being thirsty. It's going to make him look bad. It will make

it harder for people to follow him. It might disprove some of his claims about himself.

But Jesus felt thirst. He entered into desire and he admitted it. This is the first thing we can learn about how we handle desire. We can enter into desire. We can acknowledge it. It's OK to be thirsty. Last week we saw that it's OK to suffer. This week we realize that it's OK to thirst. We can have desires. We can be honest with them. Our first encouragement is simply to desire. Embrace desire.

Many of us are terrified of our desires. After all, our desires get us into a lot of trouble. Desire for money makes us cut corners or sacrifice integrity for the sake of a few more dollars. Desire for power makes us ignore the rights and needs of other people. Desire for sex makes us treat our bodies and the bodies of others as tools rather than temples. Desires lead us into all sorts of terrible places.

Just as there were two main ways that we learn to deal with pain, there are two things we typically do with our desires. A lot of people serve their desires. They do whatever they want, whenever they want. They just give in to their desires and fulfill them.

But if you're a Christian, you know better. You've been taught that fulfilling your desires whenever you want is immature and can lead you into some really dangerous territory. And that's true. But along with that, you might have been taught to stifle your desire. Push it away. Make it go away. Pretend that you don't have it. Don't talk about it, don't think about it, and above all, don't do it. Some people stifle their desire.

Has anyone ever asked you what you wanted for your birthday or what you want for Christmas? It's kind of a dangerous question. If I tell you exactly what I want for my birthday and you get it for me, then that's great. But what if I tell you what I want for my birthday and you don't get it for me. It's a whole lot safer to just tell you to surprise me than to open myself up to the possible experience of unmet desire. Because I know myself and I have been known to do some pretty awful things when I don't get what I want. Stuffing my desire is a lot safer than growing in my ability to handle unmet desire.

But then we see Jesus on the cross in his last moments as he admitted his own desire. We see his ridiculous admission of thirst even after he had claimed to be the one that quenches all thirst for all time. Jesus experienced desire, he was honest with it, and he provided an example for us as well.

This will be a huge shift for some of you. As a pastor people will often ask me what I think they should do in a given situation. Should I take this job? Should I marry this person? Should I move? Often I'll ask them whether they want to and most of the time people are surprised at that question. How could a pastor ask me what I want to do? What does my desire have to do with anything?

Where, along the way, did we learn that our desires are meaningless? Where did we learn to push them aside? Who told us that God doesn't care about what we want? There's nothing wrong with desire. It's what we do with some of our desires that can get us into trouble. There's nothing wrong with the desire itself.

This isn't to say that what we want is the answer to what we should do. Sometimes what we want doesn't lead us in the right direction. Sometimes what we think we want isn't what we want or need at all. But often, when facing a decision, if my desires aren't out of line with God's general commands, that's a good place to start to find out what I should do.

There's nothing wrong with wanting financial security. There's nothing wrong with wanting sexual intimacy. There's nothing wrong with wanting control over your life. You were created in a state where you enjoyed all of these things. Embrace desire and ask God what he wants to you to do with that desire. Just because you want it doesn't mean you should get it. But ignoring the desire doesn't help anyone.

Does this mean that all our desires are good? Not at all. But at the core of each of our desires is a desire for something given by God. My desire to punch a co-worker who has humiliated me is not a worthwhile desire. But the desire for justice is. It's my desire for justice that lies at the root of my desire for revenge. Wanting an expensive television to show off to my friends is not a worthwhile desire. But the desire for community or respect or leisure is. Behind each of our desires that might lead us astray is a God-given desire for something good—something we were meant to enjoy. Again, just because the desire is good doesn't mean it must be fulfilled. But it can be embraced.

We started out by observing that Jesus thirsted. He felt desire. In his last moments, he didn't just say amazing things like "Forgive them." He also spoke of his desire. He didn't stifle it, and we're going to see that he didn't serve it either.

We are people full of desire. Embrace your desire.

Invite Jesus into Your Desire

When we think about it, it's really a crazy thing for God to be thirsty. As crazy as it is for God to experience pain, it's just as remarkable for him to experience thirst. We spend so much of our lives trying to fulfill our desires. Here's a God who has everything. There's nothing he desires, but he opens himself up to the experience of desire. We have to ask "Why?" Why would Jesus do this?

The answer begins by thinking about why we have desire in the first place. Why did God make us thirsty?

We take water for granted, but for most of the history of the world, finding and maintaining water was the first and most important task of their life. It only takes a few days without water and you're dead. God created us so that we are dependent on liquid every single day of our lives. We can't go without it. It's absolutely essential to life.

I think it's because God wants us to know that we need something. We need something to live. We aren't OK on our own. We can't just coast in these bodies that he's given us. Every day we need something to keep us going. I think God made us that way so that we know that we need him. So we are reminded of our constant need for him.

Listen to how the Psalms speak of thirst. Here's Psalm 42:2, "My soul thirsts for God, for the living God. When can I go and meet with God?"

Here's Psalm 63:1, "O God, you are my God, earnestly I seek you; my soul thirsts for you, my body longs for you, in a dry and weary land where there is no water."

The Psalmist uses thirst to describe our need for God. So maybe thirst was given to us so that we could remember our need for God. Maybe our thirst and desire remind us that we are needy people. No matter how hard we try, we can't get around our need for water, our need for food, our need for oxygen. Desire reminds us of that—every day of our lives. Desire reminds us that we need God. We were not created to be independent. We were created with need.

That brings us back to the crazy idea that Jesus chose to be thirsty. If thirst is about our need for God, here we have God who chose to be far from God. God chose to experience what it was like, as he didn't just have cotton mouth, but he knew the desire for God himself. And that brings up echoes of the statement we considered last week, as Jesus lamented the absence of God himself on the cross. Jesus knew what it was like to be without God. That's incredible.

We come back to the question of why he did this. The answer is simple, but doesn't really make sense to us. Jesus did this so that he could know our experience. Jesus walked right into thirst on the cross so that he could know what it was like to be thirsty. That's what John is trying to say as he emphasizes thirst. Jesus claimed to be the one who could quench thirst. But first, he wanted to know what it was that he was quenching. He allowed himself to feel desire so that he could be the answer to our desire.

It's a simple truth, but it's incredibly powerful for us. We don't just acknowledge our desire, but we allow Jesus to identify with us in our desire. Jesus knows all the desires that we have ever known. Jesus knew what it was like to be thirsty. Jesus knew what it was like to be hungry. Jesus knew what it was like to desire sex. We embrace desire and we let Jesus know our desire. Invite Jesus into your desire.

Whatever you are going through, Jesus has been there. He understands. Are you stressed out and worried about all the responsibility you have? Jesus has been there. Are you having a conflict with a close friend or a relative and just don't feel understood? Jesus has been there. Are you feeling lonely, confused, depressed, or angry? Jesus has been there. Do you sometimes feel like God isn't there at all: like he has left you alone down here? Jesus has been there. Do you wish that the Father would have asked something else of you: given you another's calling or life? Jesus has been there.

Listen to how the author of Hebrews puts it. He calls Jesus the high priest, which puts Jesus in a completely different category than most people. It puts him up on a pedestal. It makes Jesus unapproachable, bigger than all of us. But the author of Hebrews says that he's not really like this. Here is Hebrews 4:15, "For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin."

This helps me to understand how I can handle my own desire. I don't have to stifle my desire, but I don't have to serve it either. Jesus knows my desire and he is there with me. This helps me to understand how I can respond when my desires aren't met. This helps me to realize that I don't have to be a jerk when I don't get what I want. I can live with desire. I can live with unmet desire because Jesus is there with me.

I can live as a single person without fulfilling my need for sex. I can live as a professional without succumbing to the drive of ambition and neglecting my family. I can live as a parent who feels out of control and not take it out on my

children in anger. I can live as a child who feels stifled and not thwart the boundaries my parents have put in place. I can live with unmet desire because Jesus is there with me.

This is my story in a lot of ways. So much of my spiritual growth has been centered on figuring out how to handle unfulfilled desires. I have a lot of desires. Some of them are very, very strong. For a lot of my Christian life, I've tried to stuff them. I've tried to ignore them. I've held them back because I haven't known what else to do with them. One of the things that got me in trouble when I got married is that I insisted that my wife meet all of my desires, whether it was desire for sex, companionship, significance, or importance. That didn't work out too well.

But I'm learning to trust Jesus with my desires; to allow him to come into my experience of desire; to allow him to be thirsty on the cross even as I am thirsty. Somewhere in the midst of that, I find that Jesus is the one who quenches thirst, but he does it in a different kind of way. Just as I won't live with pain forever, I realize that I won't live with desire forever either, but learning to live with desire with Jesus, now is a big part of following him faithfully.

Embrace desire. Invite Jesus into your desire.

Know Jesus' Desire

There's one more side to all of this. This is something that has struck me at various times as I've studied Jesus' crucifixion for this series. How did his death accomplish anything? That's the atonement: how does the cross actually help us.

There is one aspect of the atonement that doesn't come up too much, but shows up here in the context of what we're talking about now. Theologians talk about "substitutionary atonement." That's the idea that Jesus was our substitute. He took our place on the cross. Jesus died so that we don't have to. That's part of what we believe.

But there is another side of it. Listen to what Paul says in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me."

We mostly think that Jesus was crucified so that we don't have to be. The wages of sin are death and Jesus experienced death so that we don't have to die. That is true, but it's not the whole story. It is true that atonement is substitutionary—Jesus did take our place. He identifies

with us. But in another very real sense, we identify with Christ on the cross. Somehow, we participate in his death. There is a participatory aspect of the atonement that Christ offered. We are invited to participate with Jesus on the cross.

As God, Jesus didn't experience thirst. He didn't need anything. He willingly entered into the experience of desire so that he could know us. He identifies with us. He doesn't just take our place. He invites us into his experience as well. He invites us to participate with him. We started out by marveling at the very fact that Jesus was thirsty. That helped us to embrace our own desire. Then we saw how Jesus entered into our desire so that he could know us. But now, we want to think about how we can enter into his desire. How we participate with Jesus in his suffering on the cross. Just as Jesus knows our thirst, he invites us to know his thirst. Jesus knows our desire and we know his. Know Jesus' desire.

Jesus died on the cross in our place, but the cross of Christ didn't just accomplish something for us, it sets an example for us. Jesus invites us to share in his experience on the cross. He shows us how to live by inviting us to die. Jesus said this to his disciples even before they had any idea that his life was headed toward the cross. Listen to Luke 9:23-24, "If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it."

So Jesus tells us that he went to the cross as an example for us. He experienced thirst so that he could know us. He also invited us to experience the cross so that we could know him. This is why Paul says in Philippians 3:10, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death."

That's why we are doing this series. This is what Christians for thousands of years have often tried to do during this season of Lent. Know the fellowship of sharing in Christ's sufferings, becoming like him in his death. Participate in the atonement, identifying with Christ at the cross. Dive deep into the mystery of the cross.

But here's the problem. We're starting to sound very churchy. It's hard to know what we are actually talking about. Some of what we're saying here might make us sound spiritual in our weekly bible study, but what does it actually mean in our lives?

One of the things we've seen it mean is that we know

how to face our desires. We know how to admit our desire without being ruled by it. But it also means that we are able to willingly go into a place of thirst for the sake of another. Jesus doesn't just show us how to handle our own desire. He helps us to move into the desires of others.

This is what has motivated followers of Christ throughout history to give away their money or to travel to different places. It is what happens when we send a team of people from Palo Alto, California to the city slums of India. We enter into the desire of other people so that we can meet those needs. So that we can meet real, practical earthly needs and introduce people to the God who meets their deepest need.

If we haven't figured out how to handle our own desire, it's really hard to enter into the desires of others. But this is a process that happens together. Sometimes, seeing the needs of others helps to recast our own needs. It's a lot harder to be grumpy about not getting our double whip mocha latte after we've just prayed with an HIV positive widow with three hungry children in India.

When we enter into the desire of Jesus, we enter into the needs of the world. I'm convinced that God gives each of us a calling in our lives that involves giving up something that we desire for the sake of meeting someone else's desire. Meeting another's needs in a way that costs you something; this is the life of faith. This is the life that is lived in response to the cross. Jesus experiences thirst so that he can know us. He also invites us to know him by entering into his suffering for the sake of the world.

Maybe God is asking you to change jobs to do something more in line with your passions. Maybe God is asking you to sacrifice some of your financial stability for the sake of supporting a missionary or contributing to the church or just living more simply. Maybe God is asking you to invite someone into your home more often or help out with some ministry at church or start volunteering or praying for your kids more regularly.

Whatever it is, when you identify with Jesus, you become willing to experience desire for the sake of someone else. That's what Jesus does on the cross and it's what we can do in the world. Know the desire of Jesus.

Conclusion

There are a lot of major ideas that flow out of this passage. Think back to the list of the things that we said we wanted at the beginning of this message. All of these things represent the daily wants and needs of our lives that are so foundational to our time, our energy, and our schedules. We are people with lots of diverse desires. They have so much influence on our lives and we have to figure out how to handle them.

That's what we see Jesus doing here. It is a crazy thing that Jesus gets thirsty. Crazy because he is God and needs nothing. Crazy because he has claimed to be the One who quenches thirst, not experiences thirst. Crazy because we work so hard to avoid being thirsty. But Jesus has entered into desire so that he may know what it is he quenches. Jesus knows our desire.

That gives us the freedom to be honest with our desire and to invite him into it. We don't have to stifle our desires. We don't have to serve our desires. We can live with desire and we can invite Jesus into it. He's there with us when we want money, sex, power, recognition, or whatever. Jesus is there with us in our desire.

Just as Jesus is there with us, we can be there with him. We can take up our cross. We can enter into the sufferings of Jesus. We do this by knowing his thirst. When we do that, we know the thirst of the world. Just as Jesus did, we can face desire of our own for the sake of someone else. We can make ourselves thirsty in order to meet the thirst of someone else.

We're not left alone to do that. Jesus is with us and he sends the Spirit to live in us so that we can do this. We haven't talked much about the Spirit, but he is the one who enables us to do this. Jesus gives us a picture of courageously facing his own desire and entering into the desire of others. Because he is there with us, because he gives us the Spirit, we can do the same.

Embrace your desire. Invite Jesus into your desire. Then, in turn, know the desire of Jesus. Engage this thirsty world.

NOTES

¹ Frederick T. Zugibe, *The Crucifixion of Jesus* (New York: M. Evans & Company, 2005), 131.