

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

What Does It Mean to Be Filled with the Spirit?

Scripture: Ephesians 5:18-21

Code: P04

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Sometimes an easy conversation between friends can have ramifications far beyond what either person expects. Such was the case in the summer of 1872 near Dublin, Ireland, when two prominent evangelists were discussing ministry. The two men were the British evangelist Henry Varley and the renowned American evangelist Dwight L. Moody. Their conversation contains one of the best-remembered quotes attributed to the life and times of Moody. The remark affected him for the rest of his life.

The morning after an all-night prayer meeting, as the two men strolled around the grounds of the mansion where the meeting had been held, Varley uttered a brief but thought-provoking statement to Moody. This is how Moody recorded it in one of his diaries:

"The world has yet to see what God can do with and for and through a man who is fully and wholly consecrated to Him." . . . A man! Varley meant any man. Varley didn't say he had to be educated, or brilliant, or anything else. Just a *man*. Well, by the Holy Spirit in me I'll be that man (quoted in John Pollock, *Moody: The Biography* [Chicago : Moody, 1963, 1983], 115, author's italics).

Henry Varley's words became indelibly fixed in Dwight Moody's heart and mind and were a tremendous motivation for the gifted American evangelist's final quarter century of ministry. A short while after his walk with Varley, Moody was further impressed by the need to be completely obedient to the Lord:

Back in London, in the gallery of the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Varley's remark and Spurgeon's preaching focused Moody's attention on "something I had never realized before. It was not Spurgeon who was doing the work: it was God. And if God could use Spurgeon, why should He not use me?" (*Moody: The Biography*, 115).

If one Christian's informal remarks to another believer--especially to one who was already a prominent leader--could stir that individual's thinking so much regarding sanctification and effective service, the words ought also to stir believers like us. This episode from the life of Moody encourages us to wrestle with the issue of what it means to be empowered by the Holy Spirit.

The key to rightly living the Christian life is being controlled by the Holy Spirit, who provides energy for walking "worthy of the calling with which you have been called" (Eph. 4:1). Unless you are controlled by the Spirit of God, you can never walk in humility, love, unity, light, and wisdom. The life of God in the soul of man is the only way anyone can live a righteous life. To walk without the Spirit is to walk without wisdom (cf. Eph. 5:15 -17).

The filling or controlling of the Holy Spirit is a profound reality in the believer's life, and understanding it can change your life. So let's look at what it means to be filled with the Spirit?

God's Command to "Be Filled"

Ephesians 5:18 contains this imperative from the Apostle Paul: "Be filled with the Spirit." This concise, straightforward injunction is loaded with significance for you if you're a believer. However, that significance is often misunderstood, misapplied, or missed altogether. To begin with, many Christians are unclear about what the verse does not mean. Once you discard the incorrect meanings you can then focus on what Paul is really saying.

Wrong Equations for Filling

First, this phrase is not commanding empty Christians to acquire something they don't already have. Each of us possesses the entire Holy Spirit from the time we repent and believe: "You are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. And if Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness" (Rom. 8:9-10).

Second, Paul's phrase is not equating fullness of the Spirit with baptism with the Spirit. Holy Spirit baptism is not an extra experience you need to seek; it is something you have from the moment you are saved. This baptism is a theological reality, an act by which Jesus Christ through the agency of the Spirit places you into the Body of Christ (1 Cor. 12:13 ; cf. John 7:37 -39).

The Right Equation for Filling

An understanding of the Greek for "be filled," *plerousthe*, quite clearly reveals the correct meaning of Paul's command in Ephesians 5:18. A literal translation of the verb would read something like "be being kept filled." The idea is one of keeping yourself constantly filled, as you yield moment by moment to the leading of the Spirit. It fits perfectly with the process of walking by the Spirit.

An accurate rendering of the Greek verb also destroys the widespread Charismatic notion that being filled is a one-time emotional experience you initiate, which instantly places you into some inner circle of spiritual maturity. "Be filled" is actually in the passive voice and indicates that you receive the

action--the Holy Spirit is continuously filling you. It is simply another facet of the Spirit's indwelling ministry, which allows you to have daily, moment-by-moment effectiveness and fulfillment in your Christian life.

Facets of Spiritual Filling

When we use the word *fill* in English we normally think of something being placed into a container such as milk being poured to the brim of a glass, water being run into a bath tub, or gasoline being pumped into a gas tank. But none of those examples conveys precisely the meaning of *to fill* or *be filled* as does the Greek *pleroo*, a form of which is used in Ephesians 5:18 .

Pleroo has three shades of meaning that are helpful in illustrating the scriptural meaning of *Spirit-filled* . The first carries the idea of **pressure**. It is used to describe wind billowing the sails on a ship, providing the impetus to move the vessel across the water. In the spiritual realm, this concept depicts the Holy Spirit providing the thrust to move the believer down the pathway of obedience. A Spirit-filled Christian isn't motivated by his own desires or will to progress. Instead, he allows the Holy Spirit to carry him in the proper directions. Another helpful example of this first meaning is a small stick floating in a stream. Most of us have tossed a stick into a creek and then run downstream to see the twig come floating by, propelled only by the force of the water. To be filled with the Spirit means to be carried along by the gracious pressure of the Holy Spirit.

Pleroo can also convey the idea of **permeation**. The well-known pain reliever Alka Seltzer illustrates this principle quite effectively. When you drop one or two tablets into a glass of water, they instantly begin to fizzle and dissolve. Soon the tablets are transformed into clear bubbles throughout the glass, and the water is permeated with the distinct flavor of the Alka Seltzer. In a similar sense, God wants the Holy Spirit to permeate and flavor our lives so when we're around others they will know for certain we possess the pervasive savor of the Spirit.

There is a third meaning of *pleroo*, actually the primary one in the New Testament, which conveys the sense of **domination** or total control. It is used by the Gospel writers to indicate that people were dominated by a certain emotion. In Luke 5:26, after Jesus rebuked the Pharisees and healed the paralytic, the people were astonished and "filled with fear." In Luke 6:11, when Jesus restored a man's hand on the Sabbath, the scribes and Pharisees "were filled with rage." When our Lord told the disciples that He would soon be leaving them, He told of their reaction: "sorrow has filled your heart" (John 16:6). Each of those uses reveals an emotion so overwhelming within the people that it dominated their thoughts and excluded every other emotion.

Most people are able to balance their emotions from day to day. But there are times when the emotional balance is tipped to one extreme or another. Such occasions might include a wedding, the death of a close family member, or an extreme emergency or trial. When someone is totally

dominated by a particular emotional reaction in secular contexts, it can be foolish, sinful, a waste of time, or even frightening and physically harmful. But in our spiritual lives we are commanded to yield to the total control of the Holy Spirit, so every emotion, thought, and act of the will is under His direction. That kind of complete spiritual control is for our benefit and totally in line with God's will.

A directly parallel passage to Ephesians 5:18 is Colossians 3:16, which explains in a slightly different way the meaning of the command "be filled with the Spirit." The Apostle Paul says, "Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you." One can be filled with the Spirit only when controlled by the Word. It is knowing truth and obeying it.

So if being filled with the Spirit means being pressured, permeated, and dominated by the Spirit and God's Word, what can you expect to happen in your life as a direct result? Let's look at the results of being filled with the Spirit.

Practical Consequences of Being Spirit-filled

Now that we have dealt with the meaning of the divine command to be filled with the Spirit, you may quite fairly be asking, "How can I really know if I'm walking in step with the Spirit and realizing His fullness?" The apostle answers this with three clear evidences for judging the Holy Spirit's full operation in your life.

The Apostle Paul follows up his inspired command that we be filled with the Spirit by attesting to what will be evident in your life if you genuinely obey that exhortation:

Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody with your heart to the Lord; always giving thanks for all things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ to God, even the Father; and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ (Eph. 5:19-21).

Singing to the Lord

I think many of us approach Ephesians 5:19 wondering just how the matter of singing relates so directly to the great doctrinal truth of being filled with the Spirit. But there is a relationship--the first consequence of being Spirit-filled is that you will have a song in your heart--and other Scripture passages will help us understand it.

The Bible is silent on the pre-Fall role music and song had, but we can safely infer that music has been important to mankind from the earliest times (see Gen. 4:21). Moses and the people of Israel praised God after they were delivered from the Egyptians (Ex. 15). Deborah and Barak sang following their victory over Sisera (Judges 5). And the Psalms are filled with references to song, music, and

praise, culminating in this exhortation in the very last verse of the book: "Let everything that has breath praise the Lord. Praise the Lord!" (Ps. 150:6).

Other references in the New Testament are also significant in their mention of song. Jesus and His disciples sang a hymn at the close of the Last Supper (Matt. 26:30; Mark 14:26). Believers in the early church were probably singing their prayer in Acts 4:24-30, and Paul and Silas definitely were singing as they sat chained in the Philippian dungeon (Acts 16:25). Paul delineates the importance of singing in Colossians 3:16, the parallel passage to Ephesians 5:19 (cf. James 5:13). Finally, in the last book of the New Testament, the Apostle John makes this prominent reference to song:

And when He [Christ, the Lamb] had taken the book, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, having each one a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy art Thou to take the book, and to break its seals; for Thou wast slain, and didst purchase for God with Thy blood men from every tribe and tongue and people and nation. And Thou hast made them to be a kingdom and priests to our God; and they will reign upon the earth." And I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne and the living creatures and the elders; and the number of them was myriads of myriads, and thousands of thousands, saying with a loud voice, "Worthy is the Lamb that was slain to receive power and riches and wisdom and might and honor and glory and blessing." And every created thing which is in heaven and on the earth and under the earth and on the sea, and all things in them, I heard saying, "To Him who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb, be blessing and honor and glory and dominion forever and ever." And the four living creatures kept saying, "Amen." And the elders fell down and worshiped (Rev. 5:8-14; cf. 14:3; 15:3-4).

It won't be just any song being sung before the throne of God, as the words themselves make plain. The song is so special that John calls it a "new song," which in the Greek means not merely a new song chronologically, but a new one qualitatively. Every time this Greek term for *new* is used in the New Testament it is in connection with salvation. So it is logical that those who are saved and filled with the Holy Spirit will sing a new song, one that is radically different from the world's songs. If there is anything tangibly new in the Christian life, it ought to be the songs that rise from our hearts as a result of the joy we have in submitting to Him.

Giving Thanks to the Lord

Ephesians 5:20 gives us a second virtue that will result when a believer is truly filled with the Spirit: he will be thankful toward God. I have long been convinced that gratitude is the single greatest act of personal worship we can render to God. William Hendriksen lends support to this contention: "The expression of gratitude is therefore a most blessed response to favors undeserved. While it lasts, worries tend to disappear, complaints vanish, courage to face the future is increased, virtuous resolutions are formed, peace is experienced, and God is glorified" (*Ephesians*, New Testament

Commentary [Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1967], 241). Genuine thankfulness also sees beyond the difficult or baffling circumstance to the sovereign plan and purpose of God (see Rom. 8:28-29).

The Apostle Paul makes it clear to the Ephesians and us that thankfulness is to be a well-rounded, complete response that affects all areas of life.

Always

First, the Spirit-filled person will be thankful always and at all times. In Ephesians and elsewhere Paul makes it crystal clear that this is the Lord's will for you: "In everything give thanks; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus" (1 Thess. 5:18; cf. Eph. 5:17; James 1:2-5).

Such a consistent, no-exceptions-permitted reaction to what the Lord brings into your life is not easy or even possible in your own strength. But it will become your response all the time if you are living the Spirit-filled life. The Holy Spirit works graciously and mercifully to enable you to respond with thanksgiving no matter when blessings or challenges come.

Sometimes He blesses you unexpectedly, which makes it easy to give thanks. The gratitude and praise of Moses and the Israelites after God delivered them by parting the Red Sea is one major example of that (Ex. 14-15).

At other times the Holy Spirit gives you the opportunity to be thankful before a certain event happens. If the anticipation is for something pleasant, like a vacation or reunion with a loved one, thankfulness is again easy to display. But if the anticipation is more difficult or frightening, then it becomes a test of your faith. In 2 Chronicles 20, King Jehoshaphat and his people passed this test prior to a battle against the Ammonites and Moabites. When it was reported to him that a large army was coming against Judah, Jehoshaphat immediately asked the Lord for help. The Spirit of the Lord then revealed His encouragement through the prophet Jahaziel, and the Levites and all the people worshiped and thanked God prior to their success against the enemy (2 Chron. 20:1-23).

Finally, God may choose to bring a trial or test into your life unexpectedly. Then you'll be challenged to give thanks in the midst of the battle, when it is the most difficult to respond righteously. Jonah, in spite of all his sinful shortcomings, is an excellent example of how to have the right response. After he was swallowed by the giant fish, Jonah prayed this to the Lord: "While I was fainting away, I remembered the Lord; and my prayer came to Thee, into Thy holy temple. Those who regard vain idols forsake their faithfulness, but I will sacrifice to Thee with the voice of thanksgiving. That which I have vowed I will pay. Salvation is from the Lord" (Jonah 2:7-9). God honored Jonah's prayer and delivered him from the fish, right to the location he was supposed to be. You may never be as severely tried as Jonah was, but God in His providence may allow unexpected hardships. If you respond with true thanks in the midst of such times, that will prove you are a mature Christian filled

with the Spirit.

For All Things

If the Spirit-filled believer is thankful at all times, it reasonably follows that he will also be *thankful for all things*. We have just seen that difficult times will also include difficult matters for which we must give thanks (see again James 1:2-5; cf. Heb. 12:3-13; 1 Peter 2:20-21). But we could also enumerate dozens of positive things that Scripture reminds us to be thankful for. Some of the major ones include: the goodness and mercy of God (Pss. 106:1; 107:1; 136:1-3), the gift of Christ (2 Cor. 9:15), the triumph of the gospel (2 Cor. 2:14), victory over death and the grave (1 Cor. 15:57), the reception and effectual working of God's Word in others (1 Thess. 2:13; 3:9), and the supply of our bodily wants (Rom. 14:6-7; 1 Tim. 4:3-4). Each of those categories contains many more specific items for which you can be grateful, so the point is that those filled by the Spirit know no limits or distinctions on what to thank God for.

In the Name of Christ

Finally, those who are filled with the Spirit will give thanks *in the name of Christ to God the Father*. That means, first of all, you couldn't be thankful at all if it weren't for Jesus Christ and what He has done for you. "In the name of Christ" simply means consistent with His character and His deeds. An excerpt from Paul's opening chapter to the Ephesians summarizes the concept well:

He predestined us to adoption as sons through Jesus Christ to Himself, according to the kind intention of His will, to the praise of the glory of His grace, which He freely bestowed on us in the Beloved. In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace, which He lavished upon us. In all wisdom and insight...also we have obtained an inheritance, having been predestined according to His purpose who works all things after the counsel of His will, to the end that we who were the first to hope in Christ should be to the praise of His glory (Eph. 1:5-8, 11-12).

No matter what happens you can give thanks because of what Jesus means to you, and you can know that because of God's sovereignty, whatever happens will turn out for your good and His glory.

The object of Spirit-filled thanksgiving is God the Father. This name for God emphasizes His loving benevolence toward His children and the constant stream of gifts that flow to us from His all-powerful hands. James 1:17 reminds us of that when the apostle says, "Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow." If James is right--and he is--it is hard to imagine how believers could ever fail to give all their thanks to God. Long before either James or Paul instructed Christians about thankfulness, the psalmist did so many times to God's people (see Pss. 30, 50, 69, 92, 95, 98, 100, 105, and 118

as examples). There is just no escaping the importance of believers' continuously giving thanks to God at all times, for all things. The letter to the Hebrews offers this fitting capstone: "Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name" (13:15)

Submitting to One Another

The third practical consequence of being filled with the Holy Spirit is mutual submission to other believers: "and be subject to one another in the fear of Christ" (Eph. 5:21). Once again this aspect of the Spirit-filled life reflects and draws together a principle found in many other places in Scripture.

The Bible is replete with statements and exhortations about the importance of being subject to one another and ministering to one another. I want to highlight some and list various others to underscore the importance the Holy Spirit has given to the concept of believers' supporting one another.

Romans 12:5 says, "So we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another" (cf. Acts 2:42; 1 Cor. 12:12; Eph. 2:11-22). Romans 14:13 says this regarding the relationship of weaker and stronger brethren to one another: "Therefore let us not judge one another any more, but rather determine this--not to put an obstacle or a stumbling block in a brother's way" (cf. 1 Cor. 8). Ephesians 4:11-12 tells of the major spiritual gifts that build up the church: "And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ" (cf. 1 Cor. 12:8-10). First John 4:7 has this basic command about love for one another: "Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God; and every one who loves is born of God and knows God" (cf. John 13:34-35; Eph. 4:2; Col. 3:14; 1 Thess. 3:12; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 2:10; 4:11). Philippians 2:3-4 is a classic passage on regarding the interests and welfare of others: "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind let each of you regard one another as more important than himself; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (cf. Rom. 12:10; 1 Cor. 4:7; 1 Tim. 5:21; James 2:1). Hebrews 13:17 gives believers important guidance concerning submission to spiritual leaders: "Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you" (cf. 1 Thess. 5:12-13; 1 Peter 5:5).

All of those traits and actions, and many more in the New Testament, are parts of the normal, submissive lifestyle of the Spirit-filled Christian. The word "submission" from the world's perspective has the connotation of weakness or caving in to a much stronger, overbearing authority. But that is not what it means biblically. Martyn Lloyd-Jones communicates the correct connotation and meaning

this way:

It is the picture of soldiers in a regiment, soldiers in a line under an officer. The characteristic of a man in that position is this, that he is in a sense no longer an individual; he is now a member of a regiment; and all of them together are listening to the commands and the instructions which the officer is issuing to them. When a man joins the army he is as it were signing away his right to determine his own life and activity. That is an essential part of his contract. When he joins the army or air force or the navy, or whatever it is, he no longer governs and controls himself; he has to do what he is told. He cannot go on a holiday when he likes, he cannot get up at the hour in the morning when he likes. He is a man under authority, and the rules dictate to him; and if he begins to act on his own, and independently of the others, he is guilty of insubordination and will be punished accordingly. Such is the word the Apostle uses; so what he is saying amounts to this--that we who are filled with the Spirit are to behave voluntarily in that way with respect to one another. We are members of the same regiment, we are units in this same great army. We are to do that voluntarily which the soldier is "forced" to do (*Life in the Spirit: in Marriage, Home & Work. An Exposition of Ephesians 5:18 to 6:9* [1975 reprint; Grand Rapids : Baker], 57-58).

The only way to voluntarily and joyfully submit to the Lord and to one another in the Body of Christ is to be filled with the Spirit. He is the one who truly makes us willing to follow the narrow path of submission and relinquish our wills for His.

When you surrender to the control of God's Spirit, you'll find Him producing amazing things in you--things that are entirely of His doing. Paul calls those marvelous blessings the fruit of the Spirit, and they are: "love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control" (Gal. 5:22-23). The person who is Spirit-filled and who bears the Spirit's fruit is the person who belongs to Christ and who has "crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit," Paul continued, "let us also walk by the Spirit" (Gal. 5:24-25). To be filled by and walk in the Spirit is to fulfill your ultimate potential of your life on earth as one of God's children.

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