

BEING FILLED WITH THE SPIRIT: Ephesians 5:18

(Sermon Summary)

Reading: Ephesians 5:1-20.

We have seen that the Spirit is the only One who can give us spiritual life. He indwells the believer and works tirelessly and ceaselessly to make us holy. He troubles our conscience when we are disobedient and is always urging us on to be conformed more and more to the Lord Jesus Christ, whose character and attitude He is constantly trying to create in us.

We see in Ephesians 5:18 that we are commanded to be filled with the Spirit. What does this mean? How do we know that it is happening? And what does the rest of the Bible teach on the subject of the filling of the Spirit?

1. This is beyond our total comprehension.

As we have been seeing, there is much that we do not understand about our humanity, what the soul is. This, we also saw, applies to how the Spirit indwells us in the depths of our being and works upon us there. There is much that we simply do not understand. We are glad of the truth that we do possess and rejoice that these things are true of the believer. In sanctification, we have already seen in a previous sermon that there is a wonderful, yet mysterious, interaction in the depth of our being, shaping our wills, our minds, and our desires to follow the commandments of the Lord, in other words, to be Christ-like.

It is very easy to fall into the trap of being too dogmatic and thinking that there is an easy way to categorise what it means to be filled with the Spirit or offer some technique or 'guaranteed results' way to be filled with the Spirit. Some people would teach that what we read in the Book of Acts, with the miracles that were experienced then, is what we are to expect now and that, when the apostles were described as being filled with the Spirit, it is something we can expect to receive today with the same results, that we too will work miracles. There are techniques that people in some church circles teach as a way to get the filling or baptism of the Spirit. It has led to a lot of unhappiness, soul-searching, and division through the history of the church.

The Bible does use lots of words to describe actions of the Spirit on, in and through the believer. These include 'clothe', 'fall upon', 'be poured out on' and 'anointing'. These all describe actions of the Spirit on and in people, but how this is experienced or 'felt' by

each individual believer, will vary greatly. These are not describing just one sort of experience that will be the same for everybody. We have to be careful, for example, not to lose sight of the uniqueness of the apostles, both in how the Lord dealt with them and in how they were destined to have a unique authority in the church, both then and now. We should not be embarrassed or feel cheated that we are not able to have the same power as the apostles and do the same things that they did in their ministry. Getting too preoccupied with 'recovering the power of the early church', by which is mostly meant the power of the apostles, the church has lost a lot of time and energy.

All the terms that speak of what the Spirit does to, or in, the believer are rich in meaning, and cannot be collapsed into a single meaning or experience. For example, believers are said to be baptized in the Spirit (Acts 1:4-5; and 1 Corinthians 12:12-13). This speaks to us of believers being immersed in the life of the Spirit and saturated by Him. It also speaks of the unity of the church, every member drinking of the same Spirit in whom we have been baptized, being refreshed, enlivened, and empowered, much of which is not an individual experience but a corporate one of being joined to other believers in bonds of fellowship and common life.

Elsewhere it talks in Scripture of us being 'sealed by the Spirit' (Ephesians 1:13-14), where the indwelling Person of the Spirit in the believer is a sign of God's ownership and protection of His people. From this fact much will follow in terms of us becoming Christ-like and enjoying the Lord's daily help and grace.

2. What is the Spirit doing to us?

It is not the work of the Spirit, as taught in some church circles, to make us do weird things or say weird things. He is not going to give us direct revelation or give us the gift of prophecy today. As we have been seeing in previous sermons, He will be working to express the life of Christ in us, including enabling us to do the works that are ours uniquely to do for the glory of God. He will use existing gifts and refine them. He will also, as He sees fit, add to us new gifts for service. He creates preachers where, previously, there were people who were not public speakers before. He is always working to express the life of Christ in us, giving us power to move beyond where we are, both in being holy, and also in the kind of service that we render to Him.

Ephesians 5:18 is actually a command to us to have the Spirit express His life, and therefore the life of Christ, more fully and completely in us. Looking at the verse in context, it involves not giving the sinful nature licence to, for example, get drunk. It means putting off sin and putting on holiness. We are, in this regard, being filled with the Spirit as we mortify the flesh and seek out true holiness. That is to express and give room for the expression of the life of the Spirit in us. The more we resemble Christ, the more we might be said to be filled with the Spirit.

And this would presuppose that we pray, that we look to obey His Word, that we consciously choose the way of holiness, and not the way of sin. It means that we are not to be foolish, choosing unspiritual and worthless things. We are not to be angry and violent. From what follows later in Ephesians 5, we see that these approaches yield Spirit-filled marriages, or servant/master relationships. To the extent that we mirror those kinds of lives and experiences, to that extent we are said to be Spirit-filled.

The exhortation to go on being filled with the Spirit tells us that the work is never finished. We never arrive at being totally Christ-like. There is always more repentance, more disobedience to check, a deeper surrender of the will to God. It is an active thing such as we find in Romans 12:1-2 where we are continually offering ourselves up to God. We are always in the place of repentance and obedience, and of expressing faith in God. Such faith is evidence that we are full of the Spirit (Acts 6:5). As we continue to obey and follow the Lord, so we receive blessing and are showing the fullness of the Spirit (1 John 3:24). It is something that we should pray to the Lord for, that He would give us needed grace to be obedient to Him and, therefore, to be filled with the Spirit.

3. He has more to give.

His help can sometimes be more dramatic and more unexpected. He always has more to give. He can impart, as occasion requires, extraordinary insight, or power, or guidance. This is often His to give at big pressure moments and times of great need. We can see such immediate and powerful influences finding Peter in Acts 4:8 and all the apostles in Act 4:31. Paul receives a dramatic experience in Acts 9:17 which is a preparation for His future service. He will be able to overcome all the especial difficulties that he will incur as he is the Lord's instrument to establish the Gentile church and furnish all the church with so much teaching. He was to be given great clarity of thought and expression, much of which would earn him much opposition and hardship. These things cannot be planned for and are a work of the Spirit in us and upon us, a filling in the soul, that equips us for what lies ahead.

So as believers, we should be alert to the more ordinary and more extraordinary events of the Spirit, working upon and in us. We must seek the Lord for grace, power and all the help of the Spirit. We must pray to be fruitful and useful, awaiting the Lord's own way to fill us with His life and answer those prayers and longings.