

The Liberty of the Spirit Ephesians 5:17-21

Have you ever wondered how you could be full of wisdom when the world is full of folly? It just never seems to end, does it? Two days ago, a foolhardy group of artists posed as construction workers in order to hang a giant banner on a statue of Christ in Arkansas. The banner read, "God Bless Abortions."¹ Talk about a world full of folly. The pagan god of these gruesome people makes much of murder – and calls it a blessing. In Proverbs 8:35-36, wisdom speaks right to the point of this life and death struggle:

"For whoso finds me finds life, and shall obtain favor of the LORD. But he that sins against me wrongs his own soul: all they that hate me love death" (Proverbs 8:35-36). Those who hate God's wisdom love death. Think about that the next time you hear people reveling over abortions or euthanasia or hear that they are contemplating suicide. But those who love to find true wisdom obtain favor from the Lord. So how could you and I be full of the wisdom of "the only wise God" (Romans 16:27) when the world is full of folly? You and I could learn the liberty of the Spirit.

The fact is that this filling – this fullness of the only wise God – is the privilege of a Christian congregation, a local church. What would it be like to be filled with all the fullness of God? When the Apostle Paul prayed for the congregation at Ephesus, this is exactly what he prayed:

"And to know the love of Christ, which [surpasses] knowledge, that ye [plural] might be filled with all the fullness of God. ²⁰ Now unto him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, ²¹ Unto Him *be* glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen. (Ephesians 3:19-21)

What the apostle had in mind is evident in the next 8 verses (Ephesians 4:1-8). The Triune God (4:4-6), the perfect Three in one unity is at work "... through all and in you all." So the apostle prayed that the congregation at Ephesus would be filled with all the fullness of "The Trinity" – the Three in One. Having prayed that the members of that church would comprehend the love of Christ and be filled with that fullness, Paul set about to explain to them how this could become a reality. His approach is important to us. When we know that others desperately need a work of God in their lives, we should begin with prayer, as Paul did.

When we read Ephesians 5:17-21, we can instantly see the connection to the Trinity. Watch for a reference to the Three in these verses:

"¹⁷ Wherefore be ye not unwise, but understanding what the will of the Lord *is*. ¹⁸ And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit; ¹⁹ Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; ²⁰ Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; ²¹ Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God" (Ephesians 5:17-21).

Don't Be Unwise, but Understand God's Will, v.17

In Ephesians 5:1-16, the apostle listed a number of foolhardy sins. These include sexual immorality, greed, filthy talk, and crude jokes. These are characteristics of lost people who walk in darkness. In verse 15, Paul appealed that the members of the congregation would walk carefully through their daily lives – conducting themselves like wise people, not fools. He especially appealed for their wise use of time (v. 16).

Don't Be Drunk with Wine, but Be Filled with God's Spirit Continually, v.18

“And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit;” There is a command in verse 18 that overflows into the following verses. That central command can be translated, “be filled with the Spirit,” or “be filled in the Spirit” or “be filled by the Spirit.” The Greek word [en]ⁱⁱ is translated in all these ways in other passages. The point is that the Holy Spirit is the one who fills a congregation with all the fullness of God. One author described it this way: “In the light of these earlier instances of the ‘fulness’ language, then, we conclude that the *content* with which believers have been (or are being) filled is the fulness of (the triune) God or of Christ. No other text in Ephesians (or elsewhere in Paul) *focuses* specifically on the Holy Spirit as the *content* of this fulness. It is better, then, to understand 5:18 in terms of the Spirit’s mediating the fulness of God and Christ to believers.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This is why Paul wrote in Ephesians 4:30, **“And grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption.”** The Holy Spirit is the One who fills our congregation with all the fullness of the Triune God. Our unity, our spiritual gifts, and our wisdom are all as a result of the ongoing filling by the Spirit.

But why did Paul write, “And be not drunk with wine...?” After all, some people use this verse to say that “wine is ok, just don’t get drunk.” Those who say so really miss the point of this passage. In this case, “wine” is used in a literary manner as a part that represents the whole. (In the study of literature, we refer to this as a “synecdoche.”) The reason that Paul mentions wine here is that it is so closely associated with the foolish sins listed above. For many lost souls, the closest they can get to happiness is through a bottle of alcohol. But real joy, everlasting joy, comes through the continual filling of the Holy Spirit.

As one another noted, “Drunkenness is not introduced only as a foil for spiritual exhilaration. It is introduced as one concrete example of worldly folly in wicked days. It is a sample of how fools cause themselves to be utterly incapable of wisdom, sound judgment, and real understanding.”^{iv}

Being Filled by God's Spirit as a Fountain of Blessings, v.17b-21

... but be filled with the Spirit; ¹⁹ Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord; ²⁰ Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ; ²¹ Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God”

From what we have learned, the command to be filled in or by God’s Spirit is extremely important. D.A. Carson wrote, “People do not drift toward Holiness. Apart from grace-driven effort, people do not gravitate toward godliness, prayer, obedience to Scripture, faith, and delight in the Lord. We drift toward compromise and call it tolerance; we drift toward disobedience and call it freedom;

we drift toward superstition and call it faith. We cherish the indiscipline of lost self-control and call it relaxation; we slouch toward prayerlessness and delude ourselves into thinking we have escaped legalism; we slide toward godlessness and convince ourselves we have been liberated.”^v

But the Spirit of God is the Spirit of liberty. In 2 Corinthians 3:17, Paul wrote, **“Now the Lord is that Spirit: and where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty.”** (It is likely that the apostle had Isaiah 61:1 in mind, as quoted in Luke 4:18.) So what would it be like to have this kind of liberty? What would that look like? You and I could learn the liberty of the Spirit.

■ **What happens when believers are continually filled with God’s Spirit? And how can this become a reality in your daily life?**

There are three wonderful results to being filled with God’s Spirit. Are you experiencing being filled by God’s Spirit? How would you recognize that you are?

○ **You will be joyful, v. 19**

You would be speaking to yourself and others using psalms, hymns and spiritual songs; you would be singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord. The people of our world have largely given themselves over to passionately serving themselves, and found it boring. This is why Solomon lamented, “Vanity of vanities, all is vanity” when he experimented with trying to live in a self-serving manner (Ecclesiastes 1:2; 12:8). But if you want real passion – the kind that thrills you to the very depths of your soul – find out what it means to make melody in your heart to the Lord. How does a Christian do this? Since the Holy Spirit is the One who fills you, what would He fill you with – on your way to being filled with all the fullness of God? What instruments would the Spirit use to fill you with the knowledge of the Triune God? Verse 19 answers, **“Speaking to yourselves in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.”**

Jesus said that out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks (Luke 6:45). In essence, you can’t speak out what you haven’t “spoken in.” A Hebrew word for “meditate” (such as in Psalm 1:2) is [hagah] meaning to muse, mutter, utter, speak or devise. You’ve heard of “self-talk” (and we all do it). What passages such as Ephesians 5:19 and Psalm 1:2 are showing you is how to meditate, muse, mutter, speak the Scriptures to yourself. Then you can encourage your own heart with God’s very words and share these with others joyously. We are already doing this with music. (Think of it as “muse – ic.”) Your music is important.^{vi} In fact let’s try it. Think of the words of any well-known hymn. Now pick the first phrase from the first verse and say it to the person beside you. Then see if they can share the next phrase. Our hymnody here at Calvary is one of the ways that we encourage each other. Try it! You will learn to be joyful. You and I could learn the liberty of the Spirit.

○ **You will be thankful.**

Verse 20 shows you the second wonderful result: **“Giving thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ,”** Giving thanks springs out of good theology. As believers, we have the privilege of expressing sincere gratitude to God the Father through the authority of God the Son. So here is a litmus test for being Spirit-filled: Are you expressing sincere

thanks to the Lord? It's important to give thanks at mealtimes, but that shouldn't be the only time we think of thankfulness.

Obviously the believer is most grateful for salvation. Those who confess with their mouths the Lord Jesus and believe in their hearts that God raised Him from the dead shall be saved (Romans 10:9). This is a promise from God. For whoever shall call upon the name of the Lord shall be saved (Romans 10:13). When you call upon the name – the authority – of the risen Lord Jesus who died for your sins, then you really know the power of His name! When you know that you are truly saved for all eternity, it brings forth a groundswell of gratitude. And the Spirit-filled believer finds that he wants to thank the Lord continually for salvation and all His other blessings. As the psalmist wrote, “Blessed *be* the Lord, *who* daily loads us *with benefits*, even the God of our salvation” (Psalm 68:19). You and I could learn the liberty of the Spirit.

- You will be humble.

Verse 21, “**Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.**” Throughout the recent Daniel series,^{vii} we have learned about submissive servant-leaders who were leader-servants. In the Barnabas series^{viii}, we learned how Barnabas and Paul submitted themselves to the church they helped to lead. They submitted themselves to each other: one was clearly in the lead sometimes, yet the other also took the lead at times. This takes true humility. But it grows out of being led by the Spirit and filled by the Spirit. But these kinds of humble working relationships within a congregation are a true testimony to a contentious, competitive world.

So back to the opening question: Have you ever wondered how you could be full of wisdom when the world is full of folly? Even more exciting: have you ever wondered how you could help others to do the same? The fact is that you and I could learn the liberty of the Spirit. Paul's prayer that the congregation would be filled with all the fullness of God concluded with the doxology: “**Unto Him *be* glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.**” (Ephesians 3:21). It truly does exalt the Lord when the members of a congregation are united in Spirit-filled unity. And this is the true liberty of the Spirit. It is the liberty to live life passionately for the purpose of honoring God.

Pastor Gordon Dickson, Calvary Baptist Church, Findlay, Ohio www.cbcbfindlay.org

ⁱ Paul Best, 'GOD BLESS ABORTIONS' banner hung on Christ of the Ozarks statue in Arkansas by activist art group, Fox News, July 9, 2021 accessed at <https://www.foxnews.com/us/god-bless-abortion-banner-christ-ozarks-statue-arkansas-activist-art-group> 07/10/21

ⁱⁱⁱ See “en” in Henry George Liddell et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 551.

ⁱⁱⁱ Peter Thomas O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians*, The Pillar New Testament Commentary (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1999), 392.

^{iv} Glenn Graham, *An Exegetical Summary of Ephesians*, 2nd ed. (Dallas, TX: SIL International, 2008), 460.

^v D. A. Carson, *For the Love of God*, Volume Two, Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway, 1999, p.23.

^{vi} Can the Music Issue Be Resolved? Accessed at <https://www.proclaimanddefend.org/2016/07/29/can-the-music-issue-be-resolved/>

^{vii} 33 messages from the Book of Daniel available at <https://www.cbcbfindlay.org/category/sermons/daniel/>

^{viii} A study of the Life of Barnabas available at <https://www.cbcbfindlay.org/category/sermons/life-of-barnabas/>