

Ephesians 5 (18) – Filled with the Spirit, pt.3

In our last message, we examined the meaning of this command, to be continually filled with the Spirit. We learned that the gracious pressure of the Holy Spirit is like the wind filling the sails on a ship, moving us along. We learned that His influence permeates how we think, how we feel, how we see things, and how we make choices. And when we are being filled with the Spirit, it becomes evident who is in control of our life. The issue is not about Christians getting more of the Spirit, but the Spirit getting more of Christians. This is the Holy Spirit leading, influencing, and controlling our lives. This is the meaning of being filled with the Spirit.

Now that we have examined the meaning of the command, we ask the question, “How do I experience it?” As is often the case, it will be helpful to examine this question of experience in light of what this experience isn’t, and what this command isn’t telling us to do.

The command to keep being filled with the Spirit is not some disconnected, disjointed thought, as if Paul was saying “Oh, by the way, make sure you keep being filled with the Spirit”. No, this is a continuation of the context which started in chapter 4, vs.25. This is an important consideration, the context which guides our conclusions. It is a command to continue on in obedience. It is a summation of all that has gone before. It is not an event, it is an endeavor.

The misunderstanding of Paul’s intended meaning with the phrase “*be filled with the Spirit*” has led to a misunderstanding about what how this is experienced. People are seeking an “infilling” of the Spirit as if it is something that happens in an instance. But Paul was not speaking about a sudden and distinct infilling event. The Bible is not commanding us to seek an instantaneous experience at all, and so it certainly isn’t commanding us to keep on seeking them. The command is to occupy our time by continuing in a right, responsible, repentant relationship with God, it is not a command to experience a distinct event.

This misunderstanding is why so many have developed preparatory steps for an infilling experience, as if it is an event, where in a specific moment we are suddenly filled to the full. This seeking is most often in the context of intense sessions of prayer. However, there is no biblical command to pray for an instantaneous event of Spirit fullness. It is true that in Acts 4:31 members of the Jerusalem church were filled following prayer. But the text does not say that they asked to be filled; rather, they asked to be emboldened. And this is not the sort of infilling that Paul is speaking of in Ephesians 5:18 anyway.

This command is not a call to prayer; this command is a call to practice. Certainly prayer is a vital component of living in the fullness of the Spirit (cf. Ephesians 3:19). Certainly we may pray for a special empowering that we think is necessary for a specific task. But being filled in the way that Paul is speaking of in Ephesians 5:18 isn’t the direct result of prayer alone. Certainly we may and must pray for our spiritual lives to be lived to the full, but the best prayers have legs. Just as faith without works is dead, so too, prayer without practice is paralyzed.

We have already seen that while the filling of the Spirit in Ephesians 5:18 is something that we are to be continually involved in, it is not a momentary or crisis experience, and it isn’t a power encounter for a specific purpose. It is an ongoing state, characteristic of a lifestyle.

Unfortunately, some hold to another incorrect position. Rightly, they would agree that all believers have been baptized by the Spirit, and that we are commanded to walk by the Spirit, but they teach that we are to seek further infillings of the Spirit to help us to that end. Rightly, they do not teach that being filled with the Spirit is a “second blessing”, as in a once for all event where they were entirely sanctified, or spoke in tongues. But they would insist on seeking multiple infillings of the Spirit. They teach that our spiritual life and growth is dependent on these multiple experiences of Spirit filling. They will point to Acts 2:4, which describes the initial instance of the baptism of the Spirit, and then Acts 4:31, which describes some of the same people receiving another infilling of the Spirit. This is seen as proof that we should seek multiple infillings of the Spirit.

This sort of teaching, that we must acquire multiple instances of being filled with the Spirit, is a misunderstanding of the command to keep on being filled. They say that the fact that we are commanded to be filled implies that a Christian faces the danger of being “low”, and that we are always in need of refreshing and renewal. Therefore, to them, this command is speaking not only of a second blessing, but also a third, fourth, fifth, and so on. They would say that in order for the believer to be refreshed, renewed, and to continue to grow, they need multiple experiences of being instantaneously filled by the Spirit.

However, if we understand the filling of Ephesians 5:18 to be an endeavor in itself, and not a singular event, and not a series of singular events, then this eliminates the idea that we are to continually seek for an infilling experience as a possibility in the first place. The Bible doesn’t promote repeated experiences of instantaneous infillings as the means of spiritual growth, maturity, or sanctification.

Ephesians 5:18 is not about “an” infilling it is about “the” infilling; in other words, not about an instance of infilling, but about the state of being filled. And this state of being filled is not acquired by repeated infilling events. This filling is not a *metaphysical occasion* but an *ethical injunction*, to continue obeying the imperatives that Paul has been giving us since chapter 4, vs.25. Spiritual growth is not an accumulation of such metaphysical events, real as they may be.

In the books of Luke and Acts we do see instances where people were filled with the Spirit in a sudden, singular experience. These events describe a special influx of power for a specific purpose. And yes indeed, these passages are emphasizing an event, not a state of being or condition. Even so, this isn’t what Paul was commanding us to seek in Ephesians 5:18. In the sense of Ephesians 5:18, being filled with the Spirit is not an occurrence, it is an occupation. It is not an instance to seek; it is a process to sustain.

Besides Ephesians 5:18, there are 13 other passages where the terms “filled with the Spirit” or “full of the Spirit” are used (Luke 1:15, 41, 67, 4:1 / Acts 2:4, 4:8, 31, 6:3-5, 7:55, 9:17, 11:24, 13:9, 52). In those cases where we see an instantaneous infilling (Luke 1:41, 67 / Acts 2:4, 4:8, 31, 13:9) the word “filled” comes from the Greek word *pimplemi*, which is in the aorist tense, which means that it does indicate a singular event. Examining these passages, we see that with these special events the filling was for a special purpose, and the filling lasted as long as it took to accomplish the given task. This is why we see another filling of the same person. It isn’t that they sinned away the fullness; it is that they needed to be empowered for another task.

Other descriptions of being filled (Acts 6:3-5, 11:24, 13:52) use a form of the Greek word pleroo in the present tense, which indicates a state of being, not an event. There is some overlap of use in these words and their related forms (cf. Luke 1:15, Acts 4:1, 7:55, 9:17), but as always, the context dictates what is going on. The main difference between the words that Luke (who was Paul's traveling companion) uses for what we might call "special filling" and what we might call "normal filling" is that special filling (pimplemi), indicates that the action of filling has occurred while the normal filling (pleroo), indicates that a state of fullness has been achieved.

Such is the case with Ephesians 5:18. The word used is a form of pleroo, and the present tense is not about seeking multiple infillings, but about continuing to be filled. Paul is saying, "Don't go backwards, and don't stand still, keep moving forward".

The pleroo passages (including Ephesians 5:18) refer primarily to exhibiting the fruit of the Spirit in a life that is under the Lordship of the Christ. The pimplemi passages refer to a distinct filling which provides the person with a special influx power to serve as God's witnesses.

The full picture in Acts involves certain Christians described as filled with the Holy Spirit in the sense of a continuing condition, while other such individuals, who were also in this continuing condition, had distinct experiences of being intermittently empowered by Him for ministry. Ephesians 5:18 is about the former, not the latter. Still, the truth is that those in the continuing condition may have a distinct experience of the Spirit's infilling power, yet this is not what the Bible is commanding us to be seeking after in Ephesians 5:18, or elsewhere.

Believers, though indwelt by the Holy Spirit, are in a sense spiritually empty and ineffective apart from His continued activity in their lives. The remedy to this is to be continually filled by the Spirit, by remaining under the Spirit's control. Any special needs that may arise may indeed be met with a special infilling of the Spirit's power, and believers may indeed receive an answer to prayer to be especially empowered, but this is unlikely if the normal sense of being filled isn't being met. And this isn't what Paul is commanding us to seek in Ephesians 5:18.

Ephesians 5:18 is primarily an ethical injunction to believers to live an obedient life under the Lordship of Christ through the influence of the Spirit. This is accomplished by being obedient to the Word. Neither this passage, nor any other passage in the Bible, carries a command for believers to seek a distinct Pentecost-like filling of the Holy Spirit.

As is the case with intoxication, spiritual fullness involves surrendering one's control. Paul is not commanding believers to seek a distinct "aorist" filling of the Holy Spirit along the lines of the Acts 2:4, 4:8, 31, 13:9 experiences. Ephesians 5:18 is an ethical exhortation to believers that they should continually live under the influence of the Spirit.

So, how do we experience the filling of the Spirit? We can state it in both negative and positive terms. We hinder this experience when we grieve the Holy Spirit through sin (cf. Ephesians 4:30), and when we quench the work of the Holy Spirit through unbelief (cf. 1 Thessalonians 5:19). Positively, when we avoid those hindrances, and we employ the exhortations that Paul has been giving us starting in Ephesians 4:25, and when we seek the things of God, it is then that we are experiencing the filling of the Spirit in the Ephesians 5:18 sense. Let's keep on being filled.