

A close-up photograph of a hand being filled with water. The water is splashing and spraying around the hand, creating a dynamic and refreshing scene. The background is plain white, making the water and the hand stand out.

HOW CAN I BE
FILLED
with the
HOLY SPIRIT?

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How Can I Be Filled With the Holy Spirit?

EPHESIANS 5:18

“Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18).

We all want to know more about the Holy Spirit.
I discovered this in an unlikely way.

Recently we redesigned the Keep Believing website to make it more user-friendly. When I looked at the front page, I noticed we had added a new sermon category called “Most Popular.” Our webmaster Derek Taylor tells me that we know from Google Analytics which sermons draw the most traffic. Year to year we get our highest traffic just before Easter and just before Christmas. But when you factor out the sermons for those two seasons, you uncover a different list. These are the sermons not tied to specific event on the church calendar. And standing at the top of that list is the sermon “How Can I be Filled with the Holy Spirit?”

That surprised me.

I’m not sure what sermon I thought would be most popular, but I wouldn’t have expected it to be this one. Then I reflected on a time almost 20 years ago when we asked the congregation to suggest sermons they would like to hear. A large portion of the questions dealt with the Holy Spirit. When I do a question and answer session at a Bible conference, the Holy Spirit almost always comes up. For instance, here’s a question I received during a Q&A session at Cannon Beach Conference Center in Oregon: “The filling of the Holy Spirit. Is that something we do or something God does?” That question speaks to a great need we all feel.

We know the Holy Spirit is real because the Bible says so.

We know that he is at work in the world today.

We know that he indwells every believer.

We know that he alone can give us the power that we need.

We would like to know how to receive his power for daily living.

One of our problems is very practical. We don’t know very much about the Holy Spirit.

What Grade Would You Give Your Church?

Shortly after my book *Names of the Holy Spirit* was published, I did a TV interview with David Mains. Everything had gone well until David caught me off guard with this question: “If you had to grade your congregation on their knowledge of the Holy Spirit, what grade would you give them?”

I didn’t see that one coming. Suddenly I was at a loss for words. But the one thing you can’t do on TV is say nothing. The camera hates dead air. So I blurted out my answer: I would give my congregation a C+ on the knowledge of the Holy Spirit. It seemed safe to me, not too high, not too low. Evidently I sounded like the proverbial hard-nosed teacher because David looked at me with a frown.

Now I was really in trouble. So I quickly said something like this: “Look, if you graded my congregation on their knowledge of God the Father, I would give them an A, and on Jesus Christ, I would give them an A+. But I don’t think we know as much about the Holy Spirit as we do about the Father and the Son.”

David Mains smiled and said, “That’s fair,” so I knew I was off the hook. Sort of.

As I did other interviews for that book, I discovered that the first question was always the same. “Why don’t we know more about the Holy Spirit?”

God the Father—We know about him.

God the Son—We know him even better.

But the Holy Spirit? That’s another story. He’s the God we hardly know.

Acts 19 records the story of Paul’s first visit to Ephesus where he met some disciples of John the Baptist. When Paul asked if they had received the Holy Spirit when they believed, they replied with total honesty, “**No, we have not even heard that there is a Holy Spirit**” (v. 2). Many contemporary Christians could say virtually the same thing.

We know about the Trinity even if we can’t explain it. But most of us would be hard pressed to pass a mid-term exam on the Person and work of the Holy Spirit.

So what grade would you give yourself in terms of your personal knowledge of the Holy Spirit?

The Most Important Question

Before you answer that question, let me say up front that I’m not going to talk about most of what the Bible says about the Holy Spirit. I want to focus on one very important question:

How can I be filled with the Holy Spirit?

I believe this is one of the most important principles of the Spiritual life. *Learn this and you will discover a source of supernatural power that can help you every single day.* As far as possible, I would therefore like to set all controversy aside and impress upon your heart your great need to be filled with the Spirit. This is our great need. Indeed, this is the need of the hour—for God’s people to discover what it means to be filled with the Spirit.

Some questions immediately rise to the surface.

What is the filling of the Spirit?

What difference does it make?

How does it happen?

But preeminent above all others is this question: Am I filled with the Spirit?

What a question! What is your answer? Suppose someone asked, “Are you filled with the Spirit?” What would you say? It’s not easy to answer and therefore makes us uneasy as we think about it.

We desperately need the Holy Spirit today. I remember some years ago hearing Dr. J. Vernon McGee give a commencement address at Dallas Theological Seminary. He was then in his early 80s and near the end of a long and fruitful ministry. I’ve forgotten almost everything else he said that night, but one comment has stayed with me. *He said that if he were starting his ministry over again, he would give much more attention to the Person and work of the Holy Spirit.* He would preach on the Spirit more frequently and attempt to lead people to depend on his power every day.

The greatest preacher of the 19th century, Charles Haddon Spurgeon, said, “The grand thing the church wants in this time is God’s Holy Spirit.” More than anything else, we need to rediscover the Holy Spirit and learn anew to depend on him.

Observations from the Text

With that we turn to our text—Ephesians 5:18. Let me give it to you in several different translations: **“Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the Spirit”** (NIV). The New Living Translation gives a slightly different wording: **“Don’t be drunk with wine, because that will ruin your life. Instead, let the Holy Spirit fill and control you.”** Finally, we have this paraphrase by Eugene Peterson in *The Message*: **“Don’t drink too much wine. That cheapens your life. Drink the Spirit of God, huge draughts of him.”** I especially like the phrase: “Drink the Spirit of God.” That’s very picturesque, isn’t it?

In order that we might have the teaching clearly in front of us, let’s think about five observations from the text.

1. NOTE THE CONTRAST BETWEEN WINE AND THE SPIRIT.

This is the most basic point of the verse. *There is a direct parallel drawn between being drunk with wine and being filled with the Spirit.* What precisely is the point of comparison between wine and the Holy Spirit? *Doubtless the issue is influence or control.* A person under the influence of wine experiences altered behavior. He may say or do things he would not ordinarily do. Emotions may be heightened for a brief period, causing the person to experience anger followed quickly by elation followed quickly by depression. If the person drinks enough wine, his mental processes will be affected and his decision making ability will be radically altered—almost always with a negative result.

Likewise, the filling of the Holy Spirit produces a change in behavior. In the Book of Acts, once timid disciples became flaming evangelists for Jesus Christ. In Ephesians 5:15-21 Paul mentions a number of practical things related to the filling of the Spirit:

Wisdom for living in this evil age (vv. 15-16).

Understanding of God's will (v. 17).

A joyful heart filled with singing to the Lord (v. 19).

A heart filled with thanksgiving (v. 20).

An attitude of mutual submission (v. 21).

True submission is vitally important because it touches our need to be in control in every situation. When we submit from the heart, we are saying, "I don't have to have my way all the time." Only a heart touched by the Holy Spirit can maintain such an attitude in every relationship of life.

2. THIS IS A COMMAND.

In the Greek language this verb is in the imperative mode. *This means the filling of the Spirit isn't an optional part of the Christian life.* Every Christian is to be filled with the Spirit all of the time. If you aren't, you are out of God's will.

3. IT IS IN THE PRESENT TENSE.

This insight is particularly helpful because the Greek present tense has the idea of continual action. It's what happens when you tell your children to go out and rake the leaves before the snow comes. They go outside and rake for a few minutes and then come back in. When you check it, you see that most of the leaves haven't been touched. So you say, "Why didn't you rake the leaves?" "I did." "Why didn't you rake *all* the leaves?" "You didn't tell me to." What do you do? You tell them, "Go back outside and rake, rake, and

keep on raking until all the leaves are raked." That's the present tense. *You keep on doing something*. It's not a one-time event.

We could legitimately translate this verse this way: "Be continually filled with the Holy Spirit." Wuest translates it as "Be constantly controlled by the Spirit." John MacArthur says we could translate it literally with something like "Be being kept filled with the Spirit." The Amplified catches the present tense this way: "But ever be filled and stimulated with the (Holy) Spirit." *The filling of the Spirit is supposed to be the normal way of life for the Christian.*

4. IT IS IN THE PASSIVE VOICE.

This is a nuance many people would miss. In Greek as in English commands can be either active or passive. However, we're much more used to active commands: "Go to the store and pick up some milk, please." That's an active command. If I say, "Fill that hole with dirt", that's also in the active voice. But Ephesians 5:18 is in the passive voice. He doesn't say, "Fill yourself with the Spirit" but rather "Be filled with the Spirit." This is the key to everything. *To be "be filled" means that the filling of the Spirit is a work of God, not man.*

He's not saying "fill yourself" but rather "be filled."

I draw two important implications from this truth:

1. The Holy Spirit is ready and willing to fill us at any moment.

2. We must make ourselves available to him.

Let me give you a new term I just made up. The term is "fillability." It's what happens when you go to a full-service gas station and say, "Fill 'er up." The person pumping the gas knows that the statement "Fill 'er up" means two things: 1) I'm empty, and 2) I want my car to be filled with gas. That's fillability. It's need plus desire. *When your need to be filled with the Spirit becomes your great desire, you will be filled.* Over and over again. Every time.

5. IT IS A PLURAL COMMAND.

This command is in the plural, as if Paul were saying, "Let each and every one of you be filled with the Spirit." On one hand, that means the command is for every Christian. God intends—and desires—that all his children be filled with the Holy Spirit.

But there is a sense in which this is also a corporate command. *The church as a church is to be filled with the Holy Spirit.* That is, the filling of the Spirit is not something for my own personal edification. God's Spirit imparts life-giving power that transforms the church from a social club or a religious gathering into a living body of Christ. We can see that clearly in the verses that follow:

Speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs (v. 19).

Submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ (v. 21).

I am to be filled with the Spirit—but I am not to be filled alone. When the Holy Spirit fills us one by one, our corporate life will be transformed. Perhaps this one factor accounts for the difference between a church that is “alive” and a church that is “dead.” Both churches have the same Bible, the same rituals, they may sing the same songs, they may even have the same programs and the same schedule of services. Outwardly they may look very much alike.

But one is alive.

The other is dead.

What makes the difference? The Holy Spirit!

We need the filling of the Spirit not simply for ourselves but for the reformation and revival of local churches everywhere.

Application to Life

Let’s wrap up this message by pointing out three issues we need to think about relating to the filling of the Holy Spirit.

THE ISSUE OF CONTROL

Here’s my definition of the filling of the Spirit. *It’s what happens when the Holy Spirit has the controlling interest in your life.* Go back to the contrast between wine and the Spirit. Drunken and Spirit-filled people have one thing in common. *They are both controlled people.* Their lives and their behavior are radically changed by that which fills them.

—If a man is filled with anger, then anger controls his life.

—If a man is filled with greed, then greed dominates his life.

—If a man is filled with love, then love influences all he does.

When the Holy Spirit fills you, he will have the controlling interest in your life. It is “control by consent.”

Let me stop and make a critical distinction. *Being filled with the Holy Spirit doesn’t mean I have more of the Spirit, it means the Spirit has more of me.* It doesn’t happen all at once any more than you get drunk all at once. Being filled with the Spirit happens as you continually choose to live under his influence.

THE ISSUE OF COOPERATION

I believe that every Christian is filled with the Spirit from the moment of the new birth. Since the Holy Spirit indwells us from the moment we are saved, it only makes sense that new believers are filled with that same Spirit, which is why new believers often have so much joy and walk so closely with the Lord. *For them, it's the natural thing to do.*

That means the central issue is one of cooperation. Am I going to cooperate with the Holy Spirit and let him lead me or I am going to keep on trying to do things my own way?

So many of us struggle at precisely this point. *We fight the Lord because we want to do things our way.* And God says, "Okay, we can do it your way for a while, but it's not going to work." In that sense, if we won't cooperate with God, he'll cooperate with us by letting us do things in our own strength and by our own will. But then we fail and cry out to the Lord and he says, "Are you willing to cooperate with me now?"

THE ISSUE OF CONTACT

Finally, there is the issue of contact. In one of his books F. B. Meyer explained the Spirit's filling this way. He said that most people think of the Spirit as a substance to fill us, like gas filling up a tank. So we run out of the Spirit and God fills us again. But that's not the best image to use. *Think about the elevated trains that you find in many large cities.* Those trains run on three rails—two for the wheels and one for the electricity. The electricity is always there, but the train doesn't move unless there is contact with the third rail. Touch that rail and the train moves; pull away from that rail and it stops.

The third rail is like the Holy Spirit. His power is always available—and unlike your local utility, there's never a power shortage and never a brownout. But sometimes we live out of contact with his power. When that happens, our lives simply stop working the way God intended.

OUR GREATEST NEED

Here is my final definition of the filling of the Spirit: *It is that state in which the Holy Spirit is free to do all that he came into my life to do.* The key word is "state." The filling of the Spirit is not primarily an emotional experience, and it's certainly not reserved for a few super-Christians. It's nothing more than the normal Christian life when the Holy Spirit is in control. That is why the command is in the present tense:

We are continually to be

- controlled by the Spirit,
- cooperating with the Spirit, and
- in contact with the Spirit.

This, then, is God's moment-by-moment provision for vitality, strength, courage, boldness, victory and the abundant life. *It's for you, it's a command, and it's God's plan for your life.*

Emptiness and Openness

I close with this thought. *God is ready, willing and able to fill you right now.* He's more willing to fill you than you are to be filled. If for some reason you aren't filled with the Holy Spirit, it's not because of God's reluctance. We do not have to beg God to do what he has already promised to do. Rather, he is begging us to make the way clear so he can do what he promised to do!

During a sermon on this topic, I told the congregation to imagine trying to fill up a jar that is already full of something else. *You can't fill what is already full.* Or imagine an empty jar with the lid screwed on tight. You can't fill that jar either.

Some Christians are so full of themselves, they have no room for the Holy Spirit.

Some Christians have simply closed their heart to the work of the Holy Spirit.

After I said that, a woman came up and told me that I had perfectly described her husband. By all outward standards, he was a success. "But he is so full of himself that he is closed to anything that God might want to do in his life." She did not say that with anger but with tears. I wonder if that would not describe many of us.

In a sense being filled with the Spirit is an impossibility—at least as far as it depends on us. *Only God's Spirit can fill us.* We need two things—emptiness and openness. You can't fill a jar that's already full, and you can't fill a jar that is not open.

There must be a sense of need—"Lord, I'm empty and I need to be filled by your Spirit."

There must be a willingness—"Lord, I'm open to you. Let your Spirit fill me now."

The filling of the Spirit is really as simple as that. As long as we are conscious of our need and as long as we are willing to yield to the Lord, we can be filled with the Spirit because his power is available to us all day long.

Let me end by putting this matter in a larger perspective. The Holy Spirit is never given merely for our own personal enjoyment. *God sends his Spirit to enable us to live for Christ in the world.* More than once in recent days, people have said to me that we need to see a revival in America. Yes, we do. May I remind you of the Chinese prayer that goes like this: "O Lord, change the world. Begin, I pray, with me." It's not the people "out there" that need to be revived by God's Spirit. It's you and it's me.

Our nation will be better when our churches are better.

Our churches will be better when we are better people.

We will be better people when we are filled with the Holy Spirit.

So I invite you to join me in praying that we might be filled with the Holy Spirit. The words don't matter as much as the attitude of the heart. Would you pray this prayer with me right now?

Holy Father,

I ask you to fill me with your Holy Spirit so that I might live a life pleasing to you. I want my life to bring glory to the Lord Jesus Christ. I am empty and I need to be filled.

Thank you for forgiving my sin through the death of your Son, the Lord Jesus Christ.

Thank you for sending the Holy Spirit to indwell me.

Please empower me so that I can be salt and light in my world.

I pray this in faith believing that you will answer my prayer as you have promised.

In Jesus' name, Amen.

I have one final word of advice for you. Do not wait for a feeling or an emotional experience. *Go and serve the Lord right where you are.* As you walk in the Spirit, others will see Christ in you, and God will give you everything you need to do his will.

If we live another day without the Holy Spirit's control in our lives, we have only ourselves to blame. God has made himself fully available to us. Have we made ourselves fully available to him?

This booklet is a gift to you from Keep Believing Ministries. We serve local churches and the body of Christ worldwide by providing free biblical resources to equip pastors, train the next generation, win the lost, and encourage Christians to keep believing in Jesus.

We would love to hear from you. Please let us know how we can pray for you and your family. You can contact us at:

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