

Taking the Mystery out of “Being Filled with The Spirit”

What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit and how is it accomplished? Is it something that happens when a person is born again? Is it something that happens as a result of a pastor laying his hands on you? What are the evidences that indicate a person is filled with the Spirit? What if this does not happen? Is it something that is important? This article provides answers to these questions.

It is mandatory that we be filled with the Spirit.

The sentence, “Be filled with the Spirit” is found in Ephesians 5:18. Because the Greek word for “filled” is in the imperative mood, we know that God considers it our duty to be filled with the Spirit.¹ Therefore, it is not optional.

God is the One who does the filling.

Most imperatives found in the New Testament are in the active voice. For example, when it says, “Love one another,” the word *love* is in the active voice indicating that it is something we have a direct duty to perform. But in the command to be filled with the Spirit, the Greek word for “filled” is in the passive voice. On the surface, such construction seems odd. How can God consider us responsible for something that He must do? Yet, He does consider it our duty to be filled with the Spirit. As you read on, you will see how both these things can be true.

God wants this to happen!

Because it is a command, we know that God wants us to be filled with the Spirit. Put another way, “It is God’s will (desire) that we be filled with the Spirit.” Therefore, we have strong reason to pursue it as something that we can and will obtain.

What it is not.

You may have seen videos of church meetings during which pastors lay their hands on people who then fall backwards. They are said to be “slain in the Spirit.” The point of this article is not to examine such practices. But I can demonstrate that such practices are not the way God intends for people to be filled with the Spirit. There have been occasions when a spontaneous outpouring of the Holy Spirit occurred. For example, at Pentecost, the Holy Spirit came upon many Christians and great power was unleashed in them. I plan to show that while such occurrences may occur, this is not the type of thing Paul had in mind when he wrote “Be filled with the Spirit” in Ephesians 5:18. I plan to demonstrate that to act upon Paul’s command, he did not envision us having revival services during which people are spontaneously “slain in the Spirit.”

Being filled with the Spirit is meant to be ongoing and increasing, involving you, but accomplished by God, not a man.

"Therefore, brethren, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business; "but we will give ourselves continually to prayer and to

¹ The command to be filled with the Spirit is written to Christians. This article assumes that all Christians are under the authority of Jesus Christ. They recognize Him as Lord and King over His Kingdom and relate to Him as such. Thus, they are His subjects. Being subjects under His authority, they obey His commands and wishes. (Their obedience to His commands proves that they love and respect Him as Lord.) Because Jesus has commanded us to be filled with the Spirit, we take it seriously and seek to obey Him and fulfill His desires in the matter. Anyone who does not obey Jesus as Lord remains in Satan’s kingdom of darkness.

the ministry of the word." And the saying pleased the whole multitude. And they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas" (Acts 6:3-5).

According to Acts 6:3-5, the Christians were instructed to look out among their own congregation for men who were filled with the Spirit. It appears that one man in particular, Stephen, was recognized as a man who was filled with the Spirit. He was also said to be full of faith. Why did Stephen stand out as a man filled with the Spirit? What made him different than most others? Did he purposely attend revival services so that he could be slain in the Spirit every day? Besides not having any record of such services in the Bible, I plan to show that there were other reasons why Stephen stood out as a man who was filled with the Spirit. From the Acts 6 passage, I can point out at least one thing. It was evident to the early church that Stephen was characterized as being filled with the Spirit. His life seemed to evidence this consistently.

"Stephen, full of faith and power, did great wonders and signs among the people" (Acts 6:8).

The people consistently saw God doing great things through Stephen. They knew that it was God working mightily and not Stephen doing things in his own power. According to this, Stephen was performing great wonders and signs. While such things would surely catch people's attention, was that the only thing they noticed?

The people were also told to look for men who possessed a good reputation and wisdom. If Stephen performed great wonders and signs but was known for losing his temper and being a heavy drinker, would they have chosen him? No! Such behaviors would not be expected by a man who was supposedly filled with the Spirit. Stephen was Christlike and people could observe it. His main characteristic was not that he performed miracles. Not everyone has such gifts. But being Christlike, he treated people as Jesus treated people. In addition, God used Stephen mightily, and not just through the miracles. From the Acts 6 passage, we can conclude that being filled with the Spirit is a consistent, ongoing characteristic that can be recognized by other believers. It shows up in Christlike attitudes, actions and a life that God uses to bring light to the world.

To understand what it means to be filled with the Spirit, we can examine the life of people like Stephen. In Acts 7, we read about Stephen's willingness to lay down his life for Jesus as one of His witnesses. And when he was being stoned to death, we learn about his Christlike love for the ones killing him when he said, *"Forgive them for they do not know what they do."* (See Acts 7:60.) This is a clear illustration of what being filled with the Spirit looks like in a person.

So, if we want to obey God's desire for us to be filled with the Spirit, we should desire to be like Stephen and commit ourselves to that pursuit. Like Stephen, we should desire to be used mightily by God. Like Stephen, we should desire to be so selfless that we would lay down our lives for Jesus. Like Stephen, we should desire that such traits be evident in our life consistently and increasingly. Therefore, we should engage in this pursuit as a way of life until we die.

Before going further, it might be helpful to notice something about Ephesians 5:18.

"Do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit."

I Believe that the phrase *"Do not be drunk with wine"* is placed here strategically by Paul. It is an imperative also. We are commanded to not be drunk with wine. But I believe Paul inserted this imperative here not merely to tell Christians they must not be drunk with wine. I believe that this imperative served Paul's purposes to illustrate the idea of what it means to be filled with the Spirit. When a person is drunk, he is controlled by the effects of the wine. Under that control, a person cannot be filled with the Spirit. A person will be controlled by the wine, not the Spirit. But whether it is wine, or selfish ambitions or greed or lust, such things leave no room for the filling of the Spirit. Paul's choice of talking about being drunk with wine was useful in illustrating the principle he was trying to convey.



In this illustration, the glass represents the Christian. God continuously and spontaneously fills the Christian with His Spirit to the degree that he (the Christian) is emptied of himself.

The degree to which a person is filled with the Spirit will be evidenced by the fruits of the Spirit.

The degree to which a person remains filled with himself will be evidenced by things that the flesh produces. For example, if a person has frequent outbursts of anger, carnal passions or selfish ambitions, he remains filled with himself with little room to be filled with the Spirit.

Seeing that God is the One who does the filling, what roll does He want us to play?

I hope to show that in order to be filled with the Spirit, we must be emptied of ourselves. To the extent that a Christian is emptied of himself, God will fill him with His Spirit.

In order to obey God's desire/command for him to be filled with the Spirit, the Christian must make decisions and take actions to cooperate with God's desire to fill him. As he makes these decisions and takes these actions, room will be made for God to fill him with His Spirit. Obviously first on the list is a mindful surrender to God's desires.

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service. And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, that you may prove what is that good and acceptable and perfect will of God" (Romans 12:1-2).

If a man retains ownership of any area of his life, he is obstinate and proud. He refuses to submit to the authority of King Jesus. In such a condition, he will not be filled with the Spirit.

"Do you think that the Scripture says in vain, 'The Spirit who dwells in us yearns jealously'? But He gives more grace. Therefore He says: 'God resists the proud, But gives grace to the humble'" (James 4:5-6).

We are commanded to be humble like Jesus. (The verb "*Let this mind*" be in you is also in the imperative mood.)

"Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" (Philippians 2:5-8).

This is the most vivid illustration possible of what it means to be humble. Selfish ambitions and desires are set aside in favor of other's (especially God's) ambitions and desires. We must reckon ourselves as purchased by Jesus and belonging totally to Him to do His pleasure. This requires humility and without it, there will not be room for the filling of the Spirit.

When we are surrendered in this fashion, we will obviously long to have our minds renewed so we will make it a mandatory goal to read, study and meditate always on His Word as Romans 12:2 teaches.

In addition to these very basic decisions and the actions that accompany them, we can follow other New Testament teachings that inform us of other decisions and actions that will facilitate the filling of the Spirit. Let us consider a few of these from the book of Ephesians just to illustrate.

“Put off, concerning your former conduct, the old man which grows corrupt according to the deceitful lusts, and be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and that you put on the new man which was created according to God, in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephesians 4:2-24).

This passage teaches that we must aggressively strive to live righteously and in holiness. This begins with the recognition that it will not happen if we are passive. We must become determined that these things come about. Of course, this is only possible as God fills us with His Spirit but the decision to pursue it is the beginning point to obtaining it. As we set ourselves on this path, we immediately begin praying because without Jesus, we can do nothing. But we must pursue these things and continue pursuing them, praying continually along the path.

Is it your goal to become more like Stephen, a man filled with the Spirit? Here are some more decisions you can make and actions that accompany them (from Ephesians chapter 4). If you are unwilling to follow the guidance in these verses, then you should not expect to become a person that is filled with the Spirit.

v. 25 *“Let each one of you speak truth with his neighbor.”*

v. 26 *“Be angry, and do not sin”: do not let the sun go down on your wrath.”*

v. 28 *“Let him who stole steal no longer, but rather let him labor, working with his hands what is good, that he may have something to give him who has need.”*

v. 29 *“Let no corrupt word proceed out of your mouth, but what is good for necessary edification, that it may impart grace to the hearers.”*

Just to make the point that such things relate to this matter of being filled with the Spirit, consider the next verse that follows.

v. 30 *“Do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, by whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.”*

Resistance to God’s commands indicates a proud spirit, not a humble one. “God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.” Disobedience grieves the Holy Spirit.

Following all these verses is a list of fleshly attitudes and actions and then a list of attitudes and actions that result when we are filled with the Spirit.

“Let all bitterness, wrath, anger, clamor, and evil speaking be put away from you, with all malice. And be kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, just as God in Christ forgave you” (Ephesians 4:31-32).

I provided these instructions from Ephesians chapter four to show that in order to be filled with the Spirit, we must become emptied of ourselves. None of this will happen unless we first make up our minds to DO the things that God teaches and commands us to do. He does not wave a magic wand over us or zap us. But He willingly fills us with His Spirit to the degree that we are humble, obedient servants.

I hope this article takes some of the mystery out of what we must do to be filled with the Spirit and what results we should expect as we pursue it. Let me conclude by making the following statements. Being filled with the Spirit is not something that happens when a pastor lays his hand on you. Rather, it is an ongoing and increasing work of God that results in Christlike lives. The more a person is filled with the Spirit, the more he consistently lives a Christlike life that brings light to those around him. God commands us to be filled with the Spirit but we cannot fill ourselves with the Spirit. Only He can. Nevertheless, the decisions we make and the actions we take will either allow for the filling of the Spirit or restrict Him from filling us. To obey

the command to be filled with the Spirit, we must become emptied of ourselves and given over to serve Jesus who purchased and owns us. We must aggressively desire to be like Stephen and make decisions and take actions that will facilitate that outcome.

Lastly, let me address the idea of praying the God would fill us with His Spirit. I pray often that God would make me a man who is filled with His Spirit and strong faith. If you pray that God would fill you with His Spirit, you need to understand upfront the implications of this prayer. What you are asking is that God makes you a humble, obedient Christian like Stephen. You should not expect God to answer your prayer if you are not committed to become a truly humble, obedient Christian.

Notice: There is another thing you should expect if you seriously pursue being filled with the Spirit. God purposely ordains trials and suffering to come into our lives as a means to conform us to the image of Jesus. (He makes room for the filling of the Spirit.) You must decide ahead of time to expect them and view them as essential for your pursuit. If you ask God to fill you with His Spirit and you are serious in your praying, He will ordain to have trials and suffering come to you as a means to answer your prayer. If you are like me, you might have some fear and trepidation about the idea of extra trials coming your way. If so, I suggest that you ask God to give you courage of faith to welcome them before they come and the wisdom to view them as a gift from our all-wise and loving Heavenly Father.

For articles relating to God's use of trials in the life of the Christian, see the following:

[Are You Feeling the Breeze?](#)

[The Deep Treasure of God](#)