

“Be Filled with the Spirit”

The Twelfth in a Series of Sermons on Ephesians

Texts: Ephesians 5:15-21; Psalm 150:1-6

When Paul tells us in Ephesians 5:18 to be “filled with the Spirit,” many people get a bit nervous. The reason we get nervous is because we’ve all seen what goes on in the revivalist’s tent or on TBN. Sadly, being “filled with the Spirit,” is easily equated with the shoddy theology and gimmickry of modern Pentecostalism, and so of course we get nervous if we think that Paul is commanding us to do what they do. When Paul tells us to be filled with the Spirit, he is setting forth a sharp contrast between pagan self-indulgence and Christian submission to the will of God. My prayer is that we would hear Paul’s words afresh and that we would be truly filled with the Holy Spirit in the way intended by the Apostle Paul, and that as a result, our hearts would be filled with thanksgiving and that Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs would roll off our tongues in submission to, and in adoration of our Savior Jesus Christ.

As we continue our series on Paul’s Epistle to the Ephesians we are working our way through chapter 5 and considering Paul’s discussion of the Christian life. Since sound doctrine is the foundation of Paul’s teaching regarding the Christian life, it is important we keep that doctrine in mind whenever we discuss how our faith in Christ is to be worked out in daily life. We cannot live as God would have us to live without understanding the gospel which creates faith and which has already raised us from death to life.

Recall that in the opening chapter of Ephesians, Paul sets forth the big picture of our redemption. Redemption has been decreed by God, our redemption was accomplished by Jesus Christ, and it is applied to us by the Holy Spirit. In Ephesians 2, Paul taught us that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, on account of Christ alone, while in chapter three, Paul tells us that the mystery which had been hidden in the Old Testament (the gospel), is revealed in the New. The gospel declares to us that through his death upon the cross, Jesus Christ forms believing Jews and Gentiles into one new people—the church, which is the body of Christ. While the cross shows us the love of God, the death and resurrection of Jesus is the proof that God is able to do for us far more than we ask or think.

While discussing the Christian life in chapters 4-6, Paul uses a number of simple yet powerful metaphors and illustrations. Through the use of these metaphors Paul is able to instruct us that the Christian life (and our sanctification) amounts to a complete break with non-Christian ways of thinking and doing. This break occurred when God made us alive with Christ. Just as we died to sin and rose to newness of life in our baptism (the sign and seal of what God has done for us through the death and resurrection of Jesus), Christians are to leave behind non-Christian ways of thinking and doing, while at the same time striving for unity within the body of Christ. We are also to strive to grow in spiritual maturity in which all members of the body build each other up in love. When the body functions as it should, Christians grow to maturity. The paradox is that it is our striving for maturity which in turn builds up Christ’s body.

The first of Paul’s metaphors in these chapters is that of “walking.” As Christians, we are to “walk” in a manner worthy of our calling. Paul adds that we are to walk in light, unlike the pagans who walk in darkness. Light is a metaphor for those things which are true, righteous and good, while darkness is a reference to those shameful things non-Christians do in secret—well, they used to do these things in secret, now they shamelessly parade these things in public, seeking to make sinful acts seem “normal.”

The second of the metaphors used by Paul is that of a change in our spiritual clothing. Just as we strip off our dirty clothes, take a shower and then put on clean clothing, so too the Christian life entails the constant stripping off of the old self with its sinful desires, even as we put on the new self which is being restored in the image of Christ. The new self is characterized by truth-telling, a desire to resolve anger and to live in peace, hard work, as well as speaking words of grace and blessing, while the old self is characterized by lying, anger, theft and destructive speech.

Last time (when we made our way through the first 14 verses of chapter 5) we turned our attention to the third of these illustrations, Paul's exhortation to imitate Christ. For Paul, the imitation of Jesus primarily centers upon demonstrating sacrificial love for others, just as when Jesus gave himself up for us even when we were completely unlovable and unworthy of the love which God has poured out upon us in the person of his son. We are to live lives of thanksgiving because we (of all people) should understand how gracious God is toward us in saving us from ourselves through the blood and righteousness of Jesus.

According to Paul, we imitate Jesus by not engaging in sexual immorality, nor delighting in the kinds of sexual activity and crude speech which occupy the attention of those who are not Christ's. Paul warns those who remain indifferent to their sin that God will indeed bring judgment upon them, if not in this life (when they reap the consequences of their sins) then in the next on the day of judgment. Christians will demonstrate that they are Christ's by heeding God's warning and by beginning to strip off the old self with its sinful proclivity to all manner of self-indulgence.

As we have seen, the issue for Paul is not complete victory over all sin—indeed we remain sinners until we die. Rather, Paul's point is that God's people who have put on the new self, hate to see their own sin pollute that which Jesus has made new. Paul then cites from what may very well be an early Christian baptismal hymn (echoing Isaiah 26 and 60), "*Awake, O sleeper, and arise from the dead, and Christ will shine on you.*" We have been raised from the dead, and the light of Christ (the word of God) shines upon us. In Christ we are made alive. In Christ, the old Adam is progressively subdued and sin's power over us is broken. Therefore, we need to wake up and stop acting like the pagans we once were.

As we continue to work our way through this portion of Paul's discussion of the Christian life, Paul returns to the theme of Christian conduct and the need stop walking in darkness as we did before we were made alive.

Verses 15-20 are a sort of parenthesis in which Paul introduces a number of general principles which apply to the Christian life and his doctrine of sanctification.¹ In effect, Christians in Ephesus constitute a very small and beleaguered outpost in a city teeming with paganism. Paul knows first-hand that the pressure upon these Christian to return to their pagan past is great. Paul also knows that non-Christians are watching their every move, just waiting for them to stumble. If the Christians reading this letter do as Paul has instructed them to do, he knows they will come in for scrutiny on two fronts.

The first area where Christians will be scrutinized comes from their pagan friends and family who will denounce them as self-righteous religious zealots who have rejected the "gods" of their fathers for this new foreign religion called Christianity. No-longer can the Ephesian Christians participate in pagan feasting, temple prostitution, fertility rites, and all the rest that went with their former manner of living. The break from the past Christians must make would be especially difficult in a city like Ephesus, which

¹ Bruce, The Epistle to the Ephesians, 378.

was long dominated by the massive temple of Diana and a host of religious cults and guilds which viewed Diana as a sort of patron saint. To confess Christ in a pagan city such as Ephesus would not only cost you friends and family, but if you could no longer participate in what went on in your trade guild's banquet hall, then you probably didn't get much work.

The second front which would bring scrutiny upon these early Christians is one that is the weakest line of defense for any Christian—the public sins and foibles of other Christians. We know from our own experience that whenever any outspoken or notable Christian figure falls into public sin, they are immediately descended upon by those who delight in what they see as the exposure of gross hypocrisy. Those Christians who make it a point to call out the pagans because of their sinful behavior had better not be doing in secret the same kinds of things themselves. Whenever these secret sins become public, the scandal created by the one who gets caught falls upon the entire church of Christ. When you tell someone that you are a Christian, often times they see you as just another dupe taken in by some self-righteous hypocritical preacher.

In light of this, Paul must exhort those reading this letter to realize that those outside the church are watching them quite closely, waiting for the slightest whiff of scandal. If you can't refute the Christian truth claim, then you look for hypocritical Christians and make them the issue. This was an issue for the Ephesians, even as it remains a pressing issue for us today. Because non-Christians are watching us, Christians of all people should behave themselves so as not to give non-Christians additional ammunition. But more importantly, we must be careful with our behavior because we do not want to bring stains upon the church of Christ, which even now our Savior is transforming into his spotless bride (which is our subject next time when we come to Ephesians 5:21-32).

Because of his concern that non-Christians are watching how we act, in verses 15-16 Paul reminds us, *“Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil.”* Christians need to be very much aware of the times in which we live. The days are evil—meaning we live in a fallen world filled with sin and temptation. Paul's exhortation about how we walk (i.e., how we live while others are watching) is a common-sensical one. If the people watching you are not Christians (and who may not be thrilled that you are a Christian), then be careful about what you do in their presence. They are rooting for us to fail so that we expose our own hypocrisy.

But since we will all fail (because we remain sinners and cannot escape the evil age around us), we must be careful not to make self-righteous pronouncements and judge those outside the church—indeed Paul forbids us from doing this. Furthermore, because we will all fail, what we should be showing the world around us is not how righteous we are, but how justified sinners deal with their own sins. When Christians sin (and we will), we repent. When Christians stumble (and we will), we must make appropriate amends. And because the church is a hospital for sinners, we are restore the fallen. Yet, at the same time, the church is called to discipline those in our midst who are indifferent and apathetic to Paul's call to live holy lives with the goal of seeing these people restored. This is what Paul is getting at with this warning. The pagans are watching us. Don't give them a basis for scandal. Instead, let us show them the grace of God in action.

Just as we saw in 1:21 of the opening chapter, we also get a sense here of Paul's two-age eschatology. Literally, Paul says we are to “purchase the present opportunity” so as to make the most effective witness to those outside the church as possible, despite the fact that the days are evil. Both Jesus and Paul frequently speak in terms of the contrast between “this present age” (which refers to things which are temporal and which will perish) and “the age to come” (which refers to things which are eternal).

Nowhere do Jesus or Paul ever tell us to expect a golden age on the earth either before Christ returns (postmillennialism), or after Christ returns (premillennialism). Jesus and Paul are not millennialists. Rather, they both speak in terms of a sharp contrast between the fallen and temporal (this age) and redemption and the new creation (the age to come). This age will come to a screeching halt when time gives way to eternity.

On several occasions (here and in Galatians 1:4), Paul speaks of the present age as “evil.” This age is the age of fallen humanity. It is characterized by sin and death and all those things associated with the old self. Although this age is invaded (in a sense) by the age to come when Jesus rose again from the dead that first Easter, this age is destined to pass away when Jesus Christ returns at the end of the age. In the meantime, Paul instructs us to eagerly await the age to come despite the fact that the days are evil. It is God’s purpose for the church to exist as a witness to the nations in the midst of this present evil age. No golden ages, no earthly utopias, only the church militant—pilgrims on their way to the heavenly city bearing witness to Jesus Christ as they go about their business. While Paul reminds us in 1 Corinthians 7:29 that “*the appointed time has grown very short*,” I don’t think Paul is making an end-times prediction as much as reminding of the fact that the temporal is going to give way to the eternal. Paul isn’t telling us *when* Jesus is coming back, but *that* Jesus is coming back.

Because of his understanding of redemptive history—Christians must wait for Christ to return and in the meantime live in anticipation of the Lord’s second advent—in verse 17, Paul continues to speak in very practical terms about how we are to live in during the difficult times. “*Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is.*” This is the second time in a span of several verses that Paul exhorts us to act wisely and to discern the will of God. The remedy for foolish behavior is to know what it is that God requires of us—i.e., to know his will. God has clearly revealed his will for us in the law, where we learn what God demands of us. This is why the Reformed speak of the law as the teacher of sin and the rule of gratitude.

Furthermore, God has also revealed to us the gospel, wherein we find that which God demands of us under the law, he has freely given to us in Jesus Christ. Jesus’ death not only removes the guilt of our sin and breaks sin’s power over us, but Jesus perfectly obeyed God’s commandments so that his merits are imputed to us through faith. All that Jesus did becomes ours, just as though we had been perfectly obedient ourselves. Thus Christians obey the commandments of God, not to be justified, but because we are already justified. This is what the world should witness—justified sinners struggling to be faithful.

In order to understand the will of God we must know God’s word, and be able to distinguish law from gospel. The degree to which we are ignorant of God’s word, and the degree to which we confuse the law and the gospel, will be the degree to which we will struggle with understanding God’s will. While many in the evangelical world like to turn this into some sort of mystical apprehension of God’s “perfect will” (which I can be in or out of), Paul makes no such distinction. For Paul, God’s will for us is revealed in his word and in the moral law. These are the categories we are to use whenever we are required to make some sort of decision which is not explicitly spelled out in Scripture. In fact, part of the process of sanctification is learning how to discern the will of God and how to apply it in situations where there is no biblical precedent. This process forces us to grow in the grace and knowledge of the Lord.

In verse 18, Paul makes an interesting contrast between drunkenness and being filled with the Holy Spirit—“*And do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery, but be filled with the Spirit.*” Paul’s prohibition against drunkenness is a citation from Proverbs 23:31 and is often seized upon as some sort of prohibition against consumption of any alcohol by Christians. The Bible nowhere prohibits the

consumption of alcoholic beverages, but it everywhere prohibits drunkenness. A drunkard is subject to debauchery, which means something like excessive partying—the kind of thing which went on at pagan banquets in virtually every guild hall and temple in first century Ephesus.

As a Jew, Paul sees wine as both a sacramental and celebratory beverage. As a gift from God, wine is not to be abused and is to be used only in moderation, and only by those who are able to consume wine in moderation. Wisdom dictates that those who are inclined to abuse alcohol abstain from drinking alcohol. It is also clear from what Paul says in Romans 14, that Christians who do feel free to imbibe are to bear with the weaker brother who thinks this to be sinful, but only until such time as weaker brother is built up in the faith, so that they too can enjoy Christian liberty (or not, as they so choose). The strong should willingly give up their liberty for the sake of the weak, while at the same time, the weaker brother cannot be allowed to prevent others from enjoying those things which God does not forbid (like the drinking of wine). In Romans 14, Paul's concern is that Christians not divide the church over food or drink. In Ephesians 5, Paul is focusing the difference between those who walk in the light (who are filled with the Spirit) and those who walk in darkness (and who have no self-control).

Therefore, the contrast Paul is making is between pagan feasting and orgiastic partying (which springs from the old self and pagan darkness) and being filled with the Holy Spirit (which leads to the stripping off the old self and the putting on of the new). The contrast between drunkenness and being filled with the Holy Spirit is the contrast between being controlled by this present evil age, or living in anticipation of the age to come. It is the indwelling Holy Spirit, Paul says, who is the deposit guaranteeing the redemption of our bodies on the day of resurrection. Paul has also told us not to grieve the Spirit through divisive behavior or abusive speech. Drunkards are enslaved to wine and self-indulgence tied to the old self. Christians are under the control of the Holy Spirit, who creates the new self while continually strengthening the desire to strive for unity and maturity (things Paul mentioned in the previous chapter).

If we are filled with the Spirit, says Paul, then our hearts will be filled with spiritual songs—not the drinking songs of Bacchus, the Greek god of partying.² Those filled with the Spirit will “*address one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.*” This is one of the few places (outside of the early chapters of Acts and 1 Corinthians 12-14) where we get a glimpse at what goes on in the worship service of the apostolic church. If the pagan meeting halls were filled with drinking songs, then Christian churches were filled with a different kind of song.

The Roman historian Pliny wrote that Christians “recited one to another in turn a hymn to Christ as to God.”³ This may be what Paul means when he speaks of Christians addressing *one another*—these early Christians may have sung antiphonally, or even in rounds. We know that Christians sang mostly Psalms (the Book of Psalms being the primary hymn book of the early church, and the reason why the Reformed hymnal is identified as a “Psalter”). Paul's mention that hymns were also sung reflects the various hymns and canticles we see throughout the New Testament (which marked off in modern translations in stanzas). These too should be sung along with Psalms. “Spiritual songs” probably represent other types of compositions, such as those mentioned by Pliny or the church father Tertullian. Writing nearly a century after Paul, Tertullian describes how during the Lord's Supper, “each is invited to sing to God in

² Bruce, *The Epistle to the Ephesians*, 380.

³ Pliny, *Epistles*, 10.96.7

the presence of the others from what he knows of the holy scriptures or from his own heart.”⁴ Spiritual songs would amount to what we would today call “a hymn.” Paul doesn’t define this term, but based upon what Pliny and Tertullian have said, these songs certainly allude to Scripture or reflect doctrinal themes and are directly tied to the worship of Jesus as God in human flesh.

From Paul’s list it is clear that the early church sang from the text of Scripture, especially from the Psalter or other biblical texts. They also sang hymns based upon Scripture, or based upon easily identifiable allusions to Scripture. The singing was largely congregational, although apparently individuals also sang. When Paul speaks of singing and making melody to the Lord many see an echo from Psalm 150 (which we read as our Old Testament lesson), making the contrast between the drinking songs of Bacchus and the worship of Jesus all the more apparent. The goal of Christian worship is to give joyful and heart-felt thanks to God the Father in the name of Jesus. This indicates that Christian Psalms, hymns and spiritual Psalms were not sung as a form of entertainment—that was the purpose of singing in the pagan meeting hall. Rather, Christian singing was a form of instruction (that is, through the singing of Scripture, Christians learned sound theology as well as the biblical text), and had as its goal the directing of praise and thanksgiving to God. Singing is one of the ways through which we express our gratitude to God for all that he has done for us in Christ. As the late Robert Preus (a prominent Lutheran theologian) once put it when referring to biblically-based hymnody, “we sing the faith into our hearts.” We can’t do that if our hymns are not based upon the text of Scripture.

In verse 21—“*submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ*”—we come to a verse which serves as both a conclusion to this portion of Paul’s letter, as well as a statement of purpose for Paul’s subsequent discussion of husbands, wives and Christ’s church. As a conclusion to Paul’s discussion of being filled with the Spirit, Paul’s point is that all Christians submit to Christ as demonstrated through the singing of Psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. As we sing to Jesus out of thanksgiving and in fear (reverence) we are acknowledging him to be our Lord and redeemer. This is what those who are filled the Spirit do.

As we wrap up, what does Paul mean when he tells us to “be filled with Holy Spirit.” Paul knows that the recipients of this letter are under great pressure as Christians living in the very heart of paganism. While we must leave behind pagan ways of thinking and doing, we must be wise in doing so, all the while considering the age in which we live. Instead of indulging our every sinful desire—as do the pagans—we must be careful how we walk and not behave foolishly as do those who fill the banquet halls and temples with drunken songs and revelry. Christians are to be filled the Spirit, “*addressing one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody to the Lord with your heart, giving thanks always and for everything to God the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.*”

If we are in Christ, “we are *already* filled with the Spirit.” Paul’s exhortation is that we act like what we are—people “filled with the Spirit.” For Paul, this means that our hearts should be filled with love for Christ whenever we stop and consider all that Jesus has done to save us from our sins. When the person and work of Jesus is our focus, then we will be filled with the Spirit and make melodies in our heart, and sing songs of praise to God, giving thanks and submitting ourselves to that one who has made us alive and who saves us from our sins. That isn’t something which should make us nervous. It something we do every Lord’s Day, when we sing and make melodies unto God who has saved from our sins.

⁴ Tertullian, *Apology*, 39:18.