

God's Command to be Filled with the Spirit

Pastor A.T. Vergunst – Ephesians 5: 18

Reading: Ephesians 5

Singing: 251:1-3 – 337:1-4 – 68:1-4 – 143:1, 4

What is a good barometer reading of a healthy spiritual life?

The answer the Scriptures give on this question may surprise you.

It is actually the presence of spiritual joy.

One preacher of a former century highlighted this in a quaint way. He said, "If you have no joy in serving of God, then there is somewhere a leak in your Christianity."

Augustine also held this view. He wrote, "A Christian should be praising the Lord from head to toe."

Matthew Henry also emphasized the importance of joy. He wrote, "*Holy joy is the oil to the wheels of our obedience.*"

What did these men base such statements on?

They based this on the many Scripture that emphasize spiritual joy.

Let us listen to few examples:

Romans 14:17: "*For the Kingdom of God is not meat and drink; but righteousness, and peace, and **joy** in the Holy Ghost.*"

Galatians 5:22 lists the fruit of the Spirit and the second one is joy.

The importance if also joy is exhorted in James 1:2, "*Count it all joy when ye fall into divers temptations.*"

All this is easier said than done. Imagine you come home today, and your place is burned down. How would we react when our business is ruined by unfair competition?

Will we rejoice when our name is slandered unjustly? How can you rejoice when you lose your job? Or when you are imprisoned for your faith and faithfulness to God?

All these examples are fierce temptations to anger, despair, revenge or even to doubt.

How can one *rejoice* in such circumstances? What is the secret?

The Scripture we will consider provides the answer on the secret of spiritual joy.

Let us listen to Ephesians 5:18 in which we read God's direction:

"And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit.

Let us consider verse 18 and seek an answer on three questions in relation to spiritual joy.

1. What does it mean to be filled with the Spirit?

2. Why is being filled with the Spirit so often lacking?

3. How can we to be filled with the Spirit?

Before we look at this Scripture in detail, bear in mind who God is addressing.

He is speaking to sinners who have been born again.

They are already quickened or made alive by the Spirit of God.

This is not only clear from chapter 2:4, but also from the opening verse of chapter 5.

"Be ye therefore followers of God, as dear children. And walk in love, as Christ also hath loved us, and hath given Himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God, for a sweet-smelling savour."

In verse 8 we read, *"Ye were sometimes in darkness, but now are ye light in the Lord: walk as children of light."*

That is clear language. The verse we are looking at does therefore not directly address an unconverted person.

But indirectly God is also speaking to you who are unsaved.

My friend, if you are without a real relationship with Jesus, you walk as a child of darkness.

You are controlled by the *spirit* of the prince of darkness as is written in Eph. 2:1-3.

What a solemn reality: *you are controlled by the spirit of the devil!*

How is that evident?

By what drives you or what controls you.

The spirit of darkness is the spirit of covetousness, pride, ambition, hunger for stuff, pleasure, sexual addiction, anger, bitterness, jealousy, evil speaking, dishonesty, filthy talk and idolatry of yourself. What miserable company are all these spiritual squatters! The more we serve them, the more misery we experience.

Perhaps you think, "But I feel joyful and am quite content with my life as it is. I have health, a good job, great friends, money, freedom. To be honest, I have a better and far more joyful life than I see in many of those who are considered the Lord's children."

Oh, my friend, all you have is soap bubble joy.

Your joy is based on the right combination of circumstances.

Will you be joyful when all the things that you have now would be removed?

Will you rejoice when you will hear the great trumpet sound announcing the day of Jesus' return?

Will you have joy when you will stand before His judgment seat?

Or will you then be filled with anxiety while looking for a way to delay or escape from Him that sits on the throne?

Look at all your joys and pleasures in the light of eternity.

Let these few thoughts convince you of the seriousness of what Paul wrote in Ephesians 2:12: "That at that time ye were without Christ (...) having no hope, and without God in the world."

If you are without Christ and without His Spirit, then there is no hope for you if today you must die. Why is that? It is because you live without a restored relationship with God.

Oh, I urge you to make haste to cry out to Jesus Christ and seek Him while He is near to save and ready to pardon. *"Let the wicked forsake his ways, and the unrighteous man his thoughts, and let him return unto the LORD, for He will have mercy upon him, and to our God, for He will abundantly pardon"* (Isaiah 55:7).

"And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit.

These words are thus addressed to the children of God.

In the entire chapter God is admonishing His children to a life of holiness.

Why is this so important?

Because growth in holiness will increase spiritual joy.

Why is that so?

Because disobedience always brings unhappiness. Children, you know this is true. When you are obedient, when you cheerfully and immediately do what your parent tells you to do, then you feel happy. But when you disobey, you feel unhappy. Your conscience bothers you. You also feel unhappy because you have upset your mom or dad. When you disobey, you usually receive a consequence that is not nice.

What is true in family life, is true in God's family life.

A life of slothfulness, backsliding and ignoring God's will grieves the Holy Spirit.

When He is grieved, He stands back and withholds His comforting and strengthening influences.

The result is always the same: we will be silent, limp, dull, shallow, formal, murmurers, troubled with doubts and joyless!

If we are such a Christian then we are not walking as children of light.

We fail in such a condition to give an honourable testimony by our spiritual joy and submission.

As I said earlier, spiritual joy is a fruit of the Spirit and is one of the markers of a healthy spiritual life.

Let's avoid making a deep sense of misery the healthiest reading on the spiritual barometer.

Of course, knowledge of our sinfulness and guilt is essential and will always be experienced in the life of grace.

But if we can **only** speak about darkness, misery, missing, or past experiences, we do not show any evidence of a healthy spiritual life.

Be filled with the Spirit. What then does that mean?

The best way to describe 'filled' is to compare it to our church.

Is our church building *filled* this morning? Are all the seats around you filled with a person?

If there are some seats open, then the church is not filled. But if all seats are occupied, then our church building is filled.

That is the meaning of *filled*.

As believers in the Lord, we are to *be completely filled with the Spirit*.

Paul is here not teaching about speaking in tongues or doing miracles.

He is also not saying, "Seek new revelations through the Spirit."

But Paul is simply spurring on each believer to make sure that every aspect of their life is *filled* with the Holy Ghost.

He means with this that the Holy Spirit should have control and influence over our entire life.

That means that everything we do, or every conversation we have, or every interaction with anyone is to be totally controlled by the Holy Ghost.

Do you know what such a Spirit-filled life looks like?

It is a life that reflects the spirit and mind of Jesus Christ.

When we are filled with the Spirit, then our spouse will notice.

Our children will feel it. How?

They will hear the spirit of thankfulness. They will observe our contentment and submission to God's providences. They will see us diligent with cheerfulness. They hear us speak kind words and show generosity of spirit even to those who we may not count us our closest friends.

Our employer or employees will notice it. Our neighbors will know.

For when we are filled with the Spirit of Jesus, then we will be so governed by the Spirit that our lives will resemble more and more the Lord Jesus Christ.

"Be filled with the Holy Spirit."

When we are filled with the Spirit, it shall be noticeable in the congregation.

We will live together in a life of harmony and unity. We will be grace-community.

We will not be driven by strife or vain glory.

Lowliness of mind shall be the ornament.

Our speech will be upbuilding and edifying instead of breaking others down.

Even when anger is right, it will be expressed in a righteous manner.

When you are filled with Spirit, really filled, with every seat in your heart occupied by the Spirit, then bitterness and hatred cannot dwell among us.

Instead, we will live out the details of Ephesians 4:32, *“And be ye kind one to another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ’s sake hath forgiven you.”*

If filled with the Spirit, we will charity in action.

We will love like the Master. Ready to wash each other’s feet.

What a rich and attractive way of living!

Such a life makes others jealous, curious or furious!

Yes, such a life draws the attention and curiosity of a loveless and joyless world.

They might observe, “I’ve never met such a kind person.”

They might ask, “How can he or she be so joyful and content in such hard circumstances?”

But a Spirit-filled life will also prick the conscience of the unconverted and may even infuriate the enemies of Christ.

This fury is seen when they stoned a Spirit-filled Stephen.

Congregation, how many Christians do you know who are *filled* with the Holy Spirit?

How many people do you know that truly stir you to jealousy?

Are God’s people among us such Spirit-filled believers?

What a lovely and powerful testimony that would be to our joy-less society and joy-less fellow members!

Be filled with the Spirit! We have seen when this happens, that spiritual joy as well as all the other fruit of the Spirit will flourish. Such a life is an attraction.

Let us now briefly consider why this filling with the Spirit is so often missed.

But first we will sing Psalter,

The second question suggested by our text is,

II. Why is this filling with the Spirit so often missed?

“Well,” you say, “that is God’s sovereignty.

There are poor times and rich times in the history of God’s Church.

There were times of revival and times of barrenness.

That is not something we have under our control for it all has to be given from above.”

Indeed, that is the truth, yet we do not get off this easy.

Appealing to God's sovereignty plainly ignores our part in the joyless, dismal and discouraging condition many of the Lord's people are in.

Also, to assign the joy-less condition to God is also dishonorable.

God is an infinitely better Father than any earthly father.

And what loving father would leave his child in doubtful, dismal and joy-less circumstances, struggling alone with the dark, fearful and difficult circumstances?

Would then a Heavenly Father do that to His children?

But when children are disobedient and continue to ignore their father's will, they will experience their father's discipline.

And that is also true spiritually, dear friends.

When believers are disobedient to their Father's will, then they will miss the filling of the Spirit.

Or, to say it closer to our text, when God sees His children drunk, they will miss the filling with the Spirit.

Drunk?

Yes, drunk with the *'wine of the world.'*

The Father's words to His children are clear: *"And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit."*

We all know that too much real wine leads to destruction.

The meaning of 'excess' is intemperance. Looking at a drunk will tell you what that means.

When you drink too much, then you do not only stupid and thoughtless things, but you also do sinful things. You may not even be aware that you are acting foolish or sinfully.

People commit adultery while drunk. Sometimes they kill people when they drive while under the influence of alcohol. Or they gamble their income away, leaving their family stranded.

Alcohol is therefore a perfect example the Spirit uses to warn us Christians against destroying ourselves with the things of the world.

As alcohol fills every part of the body and mind, affecting all organs, muscles and ligaments, so does loving and pursuing earthly pleasures and possessions affect our soul. The more we drink of the wine of world, the more spiritually disabled we become.

Why is that?

Because feeding the sinful appetite of our flesh is grieving to the Holy Spirit.

The more we meddle (again) with the earthly, the more we come under its paralyzing spell.

For believers to be drunk with the wine of the world is like a married man or woman to have other lovers than their spouse.

Instantly there will be deadness and distance in the relationship and the communications of love will disappear.

Likewise it will be in our spiritual marriage. Through sin, the Spirit is grieved.

Sins sits in between the Bridegroom and the Bride.

Our communion will languish.

The glow of the first love to God is cooled.

Assurance and rest, joy and confidence of faith will be lost.

Recall David, the man after God's own heart.

He lost all the joy of salvation. He feared that the Holy Spirit would be gone forever.

He wrote in Psalm 51, "*Cast me not away from Thy presence; and take not Thy Holy Spirit from me.*"

And how did this come?

He had been drinking from the forbidden cup of sexual lust.

In his drunken stupor, he even committed murder.

What was he thinking!?

He was not thinking. He was drunk.

It is fearful what a child of God can do when he or she gets drunk with sin!

Be not filled with wine, wherein is excess, or destruction.

Brethren, can we not see the truth of this around us?

Are you joyful, self-denying and sacrificing for Christ and His Church's sake?

Can you still sing in time of suffering?

Are you unashamed of the name of Jesus, even if it may cost a promotion, or a pleasant relationship?

When filled with the wine of sin, our soul's legs will wobble.

If asked about your spiritual life, all you can do is grunt or groan.

Perhaps you can recall something that was sweet many years ago.

But others around you are hardly impressed.

Many in the world declare you a silly fool for holding on to forms of the past.

Do you recognize this reality? Do you see yourself?

Do you see why there is a lack of joy, lack of confidence and certainty, humility, and meekness? Why this weakness and poverty in faith?

Do you recognize why God's children are rarely filled with the unspeakable joy when they are in heaviness through many afflictions?

It is because the Spirit is grieved.

For it grieves Him when we get up early and go to bed late for the daily things of life and scarcely give God time and devotion.

Now, there may be legitimate reasons for hard work and tired bodies.

Often young mothers and fathers are exhausted even before the night is over.

God understands this and often is pleased even in those challenging times to refresh the souls of His people.

But, let us be honest, is there also not in many among us a wrong priority?

Children of God, do we loathe, flee and fight the sins we earlier could not stand to think of?

Be honest, are you *doing* the things you used to do during the time of your first love?

Then even the distant sight of sin made you run; but now ... sins can sit next to us without us flinching an eyebrow.

If that is the case, you are drunk with the wine of the world.

You are grieving the Holy Spirit.

And if He is grieved, He ceases to do His work as Comforter and Assurer.

Then we do not sing anymore except when we sit in church.

Then we complain and groan more over the results of our own sins than sin itself and the dishonour and pain we have done to God and our Saviour.

Or our conversations are shallow and earthly: about others, about work, our hobby, or maybe about our former spiritual experiences, for maybe that will impress others or soothe our consciences.

Is it somewhat clearer to us why so often we fail in our spiritual joy? Can you see the destructive power in the drinking of the wine of the world?

This brings us to our last question,

III. How can we be filled with the Holy Spirit?

This question really deserves our attention.

If we live a joyless life with only a sigh and a cry,
or when we have disunity among us,
or when we eat and drink and live like the world,
or when we cling to material luxury,
then Christianity has lost all its power and authority.

To such a Christianity the world looks with pity instead of admiration.

They think that such Christians are just clinging to a soothing blanket like little children do.

Does that thought bother you too, fellow saints?

Let us then heed what God is directing us to: *Be filled with the Spirit.*

No, it is not something we can do ourselves. We are *to be* filled.

Someone must fill us and that Someone is God Himself.

We cannot fill ourselves with the Spirit as we have no control over Him.

And yet we are not to sit back and wait. The word 'be filled' is an exhortation as well.

God spurs us on not to be satisfied until every seat is occupied.

Or, to say it more spiritually, we are to be filled until every aspect of our life is controlled and shining with the Spirit's presence.

No, of course, perfection must not be expected on this earth.

To be fully filled with the Spirit is not till we are moved from grace to glory.

William Fenner, a Puritan, pointed out, “None of us in this life will walk so purely, so unspotted, so steadily, so effectually as Christ lived, though this is our goal while running the Christian race.”

None of us should expect that in this life we will be so filled with the Spirit as Christ was. But that should not make us strive any less.

So how can we be spiritually joyful?

Our text gives a divine direction: *Be filled with the Spirit!*

It doesn't say “*Fill yourself*” but “**Be filled with the Spirit.**”

In others, there is **Another** Who needs to do this filling with the Spirit.

And yet, God's direction is given as a *command*.

God did not say, “*May you be filled with the Spirit.*” Or “*We hope that you be filled with the Spirit.*”

No, He commands us to be filled.

Though it is God's work from beginning to end, and without Him we can do nothing--still He expects all His children to also work.

Yes, you heard that right: to be filled with the Spirit includes your work, fellow saints.

In Philippians 2:12 God speaks about this work, “*Wherefore, my beloved, as ye have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, **work out** your own salvation with fear and trembling. For it is God which worketh in you both to will and to do of His good pleasure.*”

Do you know what working out your own salvation means?

It is living out of the glorious gift of the new life given in our regeneration. Having been reconciled with God through merits of Jesus Christ, working out salvation means that we now live the life of faith.

It is like the relationship in marriage.

Do you remember how careful you were when you married your spouse?

With ‘fear and trembling’ you considered what to say or do.

In no way did you want to offend or displease the person you loved.

You gave each other full attention. You sacrificed sleep and time for each other.

You know that the results of such behaviour were worth the effort!

The relationship grew deeper. Or to say it closer to our text, you were filled with a spirit and joy you never knew before.

Now use that example to think about God's direction: *Be filled with the Spirit.*

In Acts 9:31 we read God's own commentary on this Scripture,

"Then had the churches rest throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria and were edified; and walking in the fear of the Lord, and in the comfort of the Holy Ghost, were multiplied."

Notice the link between the *fear of the Lord and the comfort of the Holy Ghost.*

The order is not random. As they honoured the Spirit by obedience heeding His Word and their tender conscience, the Spirit filled them.

God undoubtedly used their joyful comfort of the Holy Spirit in the midst of all their suffering as a drawing force to bring more and more sinners into the kingdom of His grace.

Oh, that we also would be Christians in our community, walking in the fear of God and the comfort of the Holy Spirit, so that the Lord would multiply His Kingdom through us!

How are we to be filled with the Spirit? The words of our text are connected to the chapter in which they are found.

Before and after we find many exhortations on *how we are to live in this God forsaking and God forsaken culture.*

We are to walk circumspectly, that is carefully weighing each step.

We are to redeem the time God gives us.

He calls us to be wise and seek to find out what the Lord's will is and prove first what is acceptable to Him.

Be far from fellowship with the works of darkness, such as the evils of sexual lust, material idolatry, dishonest business practice, neglect of the poor, foolish and mindless entertainment.

We are all busy; work or family tends to swallow us up.

Many of these things are lawful and unavoidable.

But what do we do with the little extra time we are given?

“Oh, but we do need to have some time for relaxation, some down-time.”

Yet God’s will is, *Redeem the time because the days are evil!*

Are we using the extra time to deepen our relationship with God?

Are we making it a priority to dig into the treasures of teaching in books and sermons to enrich our understanding of God and His glory?

Are we living a life of singing and thankfulness as mentioned in the next verses?

Doing this is the way to be filled with the Spirit.

For it is *through the use of means* that God ministers His Spirit into our hearts.

Another example is In the previous chapter where God points to our speech.

In Ephesians 4:29, He says, *“Let no corrupt (or corrupting) communication proceed out of your mouth, but that which is ... edifying, that it may minister grace to (ANY) hearer.”*

We all know how strain and stress can cause our tongue to become a dagger.

Instead of a ministry of grace upon our family, we pour acid upon them.

But notice how He adds in the next verse: *“And grieve not the Holy Spirit of God.”*

These are connected!

All sinful actions and reactions, all sinful words and attitudes are like the wine of the world.

They deaden the soul; they grieve the Spirit and He will cease to do His holy and comforting work within us.

Beloved fellow believers: *if we are not filled with the Spirit, it is because we grieve Him.*

He will not fill us with Himself and His blessed influences when we are filling ourselves with the wine of the world,

when we adopt the ways of the world,

when we embrace the bosom of a stranger: the world.

When my children offend me, I become distant when I send them off to their room.

When I offend my wife with unkind words, her spirit will be grieved and that will cause distance. If I don’t reconcile, our marriage will become stale and joyless, formal and routine.

If that describes your spiritual life, then these Scriptures around Ephesians 5:18 will give you the answer why.

Take these verses before you and get on your knees before the Searcher of hearts.

Confess before Him that your spiritual life is stale, shallow, at a standstill, without the glow of love of former days.

Seek Him to shed the light of His searching Word and reveal the foxes that are destroying the tender branches of your spiritual life.

Ask Him, *“Lord, am I loving my spouse as Thou calls me to love him or her? Am I loving my parents and siblings as Thou did, Lord Jesus? Am I loving workmates or employees? Am I a faithful employee, honouring my employer? Do I lead my family with love and tenderness? Do I have absolutely no willing fellowship with any of the works of darkness? Do I really hate the least taint and touch of sin and flee it as resolutely as Joseph did from Potiphar’s wife?”*

Take these chapters on the life of sanctification and pray through them verse by verse.

Years ago, an elder shared with me this sage insight, *“Brother, when I notice that my spiritual life is like a walking in the dark, when there is little genuine joy, so little strength to resist the suggestions of sin, then I set myself before the Lord in prayer and ask Him, ‘Lord, show me my sin that is the cause of my lackluster spiritual condition.’ By experience I know that the first thing that comes up in my conscience is my chief sin. And yet, I find in me an instant resistance to excuse it ...”*

This piece of wisdom has proven to be right multiple times.

And be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled with the Spirit.

When God’s Church will be filled with the Spirit, then there will be a joy that is infectious. Then it may be that when unbelievers observe us, they may make the same remark as a Roman citizen did long ago. He saw Christians exit their prison doors into the arena to be eaten by wild animals. He stated, *“It appeared to me as if they came from a stately palace into a lovely garden, instead coming from a stinking dungeon into the garden of death.”*

When the people of our community observe us this week, will they wonder, *“What makes him or her so different, even joyful in difficult circumstances?”*

What a blessing if they will ask us, *“Say, can I ask you a question: how can you be like you are? What is your secret? Can you share what makes you so thankful, so joyful, so content, so gracious, so kind, so sacrificial, or so genuine?”*

Church of God, heed the Lord’s command. Be not drunk with wine, wherein is excess; but be filled the Spirit.

Amen.