

Being Filled with the Holy Spirit

SERVICE & SPIRITUALITY

Our Lord did not send His disciples into the world with only a teaching. He sent them with a Person. The Holy Spirit, poured out upon the Church at Pentecost, is not one more gift among many; He is the Gift that makes every other gift come alive. Without Him, the Scriptures remain ink on a page; with Him, they become living water. Without Him, the Eucharist remains bread and wine; with Him, it becomes the Body and Blood of Christ. Without Him, our service is kindly human effort; with Him, it becomes a vessel for the very life of God reaching souls who could not be reached any other way. Every servant who is going to last must learn, gently and deliberately, to be filled with the Spirit — not as a one-time event but as the steady breathing of the Christian life. In this lesson we will sit with the promise our Lord gave us before He ascended, we will watch the first disciples receive what He promised, and we will learn from Scripture and the Fathers how the servant today still stands in the same upper room, lifts the same prayer, and is filled with the same Spirit who has never stopped being given.

The Gift Our Lord Refused to Leave Us Without

On the night before His passion, our Lord spoke to His disciples about a parting He Himself found difficult. He did not hide His tenderness from them. He knew they were not ready to be left alone, and He had no intention of leaving them alone. He comforted them with a promise that has steadied the whole Church ever since:

“I will not leave you orphans; I will come to you.” (John 14:18, NKJV)

He was not speaking only about the forty days of resurrection appearances. He was pointing forward to the day when, bodily ascended to the Father, He would send the Holy Spirit to dwell within His disciples for the rest of time. Just a few verses earlier He had named the Gift by name:

“And I will pray the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may abide with you forever — the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees Him nor knows Him; but you know Him, for He dwells with you and will be in you.” (John 14:16–17, NKJV)

Every word is tender. Another Helper, like Christ Himself in His helping. Forever, not for a season. The Spirit of truth, who will keep His disciples from drifting into their own imaginings. Dwells with you and will be in you — a move of nearness from outside to inside, from companion beside them to life within them. This was the plan all along. Our Lord did not die merely to deliver us from sin; He died, rose, and ascended so that His own Spirit could live inside His people and form them, from the inside out, into the likeness of the Son.

St. Athanasius, defending this very doctrine against those who wished to reduce the Spirit to something less, wrote with the plainness of a man who had touched the truth personally:

“The Son was sent so that we might receive the Spirit, and the Spirit is given so that we may live the life of the Son. What the Son has accomplished for us outside of us, the Spirit accomplishes in us within. They do not compete, for what the One has wrought in flesh the Other writes upon the heart.” — St. Athanasius, Letters to Serapion, I

Outside of us, and in us. This is the whole economy of the Gospel in miniature. The servant who misses the second half has only half the Gospel. The Lord did not want us to stop at Calvary; He wanted us to come all the way to Pentecost, where the fruit of Calvary is placed into the very marrow of our souls.

The First Filling and Its Pattern

Fifty days after Pascha, what our Lord had promised was given. The scene is one the Church has celebrated every year since, and every year we do well to sit with it again:

“When the Day of Pentecost had fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven, as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled the whole house where they were sitting. Then there appeared to them divided tongues, as of fire, and one sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance.”
(Acts 2:1–4, NKJV)

The details are not decorative. Each one tells us something about how the Spirit fills us still. They were all with one accord. The first filling came to a praying community, not to a solitary genius. The Spirit loves unity, and He rests most readily on disciples who have set aside their disagreements and come to the same room. They were all in one place. The Spirit came to those who had gathered where He had been expected to come; they were not scattered elsewhere doing their own business. The sound came from heaven. The initiative was God's, not theirs; they could not have manufactured what they received. The tongues rested on each of them. The Spirit is given personally, not as a general atmosphere over the Church, but as a flame resting on the head of each individual member of her.

And the result was that they were filled. Not emptied. Not erased. Not overridden. Filled. Each disciple remained himself — Peter, impetuous and honest; John, beloved and quiet; Matthew, careful and watchful — and yet each was now the vessel of a life infinitely greater than his own personality. This is always what the Spirit does when He fills a soul. He does not replace us. He makes us more fully who we were meant to be in the first place.

St. Cyril of Alexandria, preaching on this text to a congregation in Egypt that knew in its bones the difference between a dead religion and a living one, said it with characteristic precision:

“The Spirit does not erase what He enters; He makes it shine. The flame that rested on St. Peter did not abolish Peter — it set Peter on fire. So also in us: every gift we possess, every temperament, every weakness, is offered to the Spirit not for destruction but for

transfiguration.” — St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of John, on John 14

The whole servant, handed to the Spirit, becomes the whole servant on fire. Nothing of us is wasted; everything of us is set alight.

Be Filled — A Continuous Invitation

Pentecost was a once-in-history event in its dramatic form, but the filling of the Spirit is not a once-in-history event in the life of a Christian. The New Testament writers speak of this filling in the present tense, as an ongoing reality that every disciple is called into again and again. St. Paul commands it directly:

“And do not be drunk with wine, in which is dissipation; but be filled with the Spirit, speaking to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing and making melody in your heart to the Lord.” (Ephesians 5:18–19, NKJV)

The Greek verb is in the present continuous — keep on being filled. St. Paul is not addressing this to people who have never received the Spirit; he is writing to baptized Christians. The filling he calls them to is not a second initiation; it is the ordinary posture of a disciple who knows the Spirit indwells him and who keeps opening the door wider for Him day after day.

The Book of Acts reinforces this pattern. The same disciples who were filled at Pentecost in chapter two are filled again in chapter four, when they have finished a season of prayer after persecution:

“And when they had prayed, the place where they were assembled together was shaken; and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and they spoke the word of God with boldness.” (Acts 4:31, NKJV)

The same apostles, filled again. This is not a theological contradiction; it is a pastoral gift. The filling of the Spirit is meant to be re-applied. A servant who was filled at his chrismation as an infant is meant to be filled again at his ordination, and again at every sunrise, and again before every difficult conversation, and again on every day when he feels that he has nothing left of his own to give. The Spirit does not grow tired of being poured out. We grow tired only because we forget to ask.

St. Seraphim of Sarov, whose own face once shone with the uncreated light before his disciple Motovilov, told his visitor plainly what the whole goal of the Christian life is:

“The true aim of the Christian life is the acquisition of the Holy Spirit of God. Fasting and prayer and almsgiving are good things, but they are only means. The end is the Spirit Himself. Acquire Him, my friend; acquire the Spirit of peace, and a thousand around you will find their salvation.” — St. Seraphim of Sarov, Conversation with Motovilov

Acquire Him. The verb is startling at first — we do not usually think of acquiring a Person — but St. Seraphim has chosen it deliberately. A gift received yesterday becomes, by our daily yes, a life lived

today. The Spirit is given at baptism and chrismation as a seed. The work of a lifetime is to let that seed fill every corner of the garden.

The Fruit By Which We Recognize Him

How do we know when the Holy Spirit is filling us? Not primarily by dramatic phenomena. Not primarily by emotional intensity. Not primarily by whether a season in our service feels fruitful to us or not. The New Testament tells us with disarming simplicity how to recognize the Spirit's work in a soul. We look for the fruit:

“But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control. Against such there is no law.” (Galatians 5:22–23, NKJV)

Nine fruits, growing on a single tree. Notice how domestic they are. They are not the spectacular gifts that would draw a crowd. They are the qualities our family members would notice if we lived with them for a year. They are the qualities our spouse, our children, the parishioners who carpool with us, the coworkers who share our office would see whether we were preaching or not. The Spirit, when He is filling a soul, does not make that soul louder or more impressive. He makes it more like Christ — and Christ, more than any other figure in history, is known by love, joy, peace, and the other seven quiet glories on that list.

St. Paul's list is also, tenderly, a diagnostic. If we want to know where the Spirit has been given the most room in our lives, we look to the place where these fruits are most visibly growing. And if we want to know where we are still resisting Him, we look to the places where these fruits are still visibly sparse. A week of honest examination along these nine lines will tell a servant more about the state of his soul than a week of abstract theological reflection.

St. Macarius the Great spoke of this connection between the Spirit's indwelling and the ripening of the soul with all the candor of the desert:

“The Spirit does not descend upon a soul all at once, as if to replace it; He descends gradually, as light enters a room. He lights up first one corner, then another, until at last nothing of the room remains in shadow. Our work is simply to keep opening the windows.” — St. Macarius the Great, Spiritual Homilies, VIII

Keep opening the windows. That is the whole spiritual discipline of a Spirit-filled servant, told in five words.

The Spirit in the Servant's Work

The filling of the Spirit is not only for our private sanctification. It is also the engine of our service. St. Paul tells Timothy that the gift of ministry itself is a gift of the Spirit, to be stirred up when the fire seems low:

“Therefore I remind you to stir up the gift of God which is in you through the laying on of my hands. For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.” (2 Timothy 1:6–7, NKJV)

Stir up. The image is of a banked coal on the hearth, waiting for a breath of air. The coal is not gone; it is there, sometimes beneath a surprising amount of ash. A servant who feels his own ministry has grown cold is not being told to start again from nothing. He is being told to stir. A fresh hour of prayer before the icon, an honest confession, a deliberate returning to the Scriptures he had drifted away from, the laying on of hands by a bishop or a father of confession in a moment of renewal — any of these is the breath the banked coal is waiting for.

When the Spirit moves in our service, we are able to do things we cannot do on our own power. We find patience where we had no patience. We speak words we had not prepared. We love people our natural temperament could not love. We persevere through seasons we would have walked out of years ago. This is not our own strength suddenly discovered. This is the Spirit, living in us, doing through us what we could never have done without Him. The servant who has learned to recognize this grace learns, after a while, not to take credit for it.

The whole Church in the Book of Acts is a running case study in Spirit-led service. She moves when the Spirit moves. She waits when the Spirit waits. She speaks when the Spirit speaks. She is silent when the Spirit is silent. Her great single summary statement is one every modern servant should memorize:

“For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us.” (Acts 15:28, NKJV)

To the Holy Spirit, and then to us. The order matters. He leads; we follow. The moment we reverse that order, our service begins to strain under its own weight, and the fruit begins to thin. When we restore the order, the work breathes again.

A Prayer for the Daily Filling

Because the filling of the Spirit is not a one-time event, it is also not a one-time prayer. The servant grows, over time, into the habit of asking to be filled afresh each day. There are many such prayers; we need not complicate it. The Lord's own prayer for the Spirit, addressed to the Father on our behalf, is perhaps the most tender:

“If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your heavenly Father give the Holy Spirit to those who ask Him!” (Luke 11:13, NKJV)

How much more. Our tender God is not reluctant about this gift. He is not carefully rationing the Spirit, waiting for us to earn Him. He is eager to give, and He gives to those who simply ask. The short prayer "Lord, fill me today with Your Holy Spirit" — prayed in the shower, in the car, at the kitchen sink, before the lesson we are about to teach — is a prayer the Lord delights to answer. It is one of the most generous trades in the spiritual life. A thirty-second prayer answered by a day-long indwelling.

The Church herself has given us, in her own liturgical life, the great prayer for the Spirit's coming. Every Orthodox Christian knows it by heart, and every servant should pray it often and slowly:

“O Heavenly King, the Comforter, the Spirit of Truth, who art everywhere present and fillest all things; Treasury of Blessings, and Giver of Life — come and abide in us, and cleanse us from every impurity, and save our souls, O Good One.” — Prayer to the Holy Spirit (from the Divine Liturgy)

Come and abide. Cleanse. Save. The three verbs the Spirit waits to fulfill in us, on every morning we ask. May the Lord who has given us His own Spirit for a Helper and a Comforter keep filling us as we keep opening. May the fruit of His indwelling — the love and joy and peace and all the rest — be visible in our homes and in our service this week. And may we, at the end of a long life of letting the windows stand open, find that the Spirit has filled every corner of us, until there is no shadow left where He is not dwelling and no part of us that is not a vessel for the life of our tender God.

Review Questions

1. Our Lord tells His disciples, 'I will not leave you orphans' (John 14:18, NKJV), and His answer to that parting is the sending of the Holy Spirit. How does this change the way we understand the Spirit — not as an addition to the Gospel but as the inside of it?
2. St. Paul commands, 'Be filled with the Spirit' (Ephesians 5:18, NKJV), in a continuous-tense verb. How have we understood 'being filled' in our own life — as a one-time event or as a daily posture — and what would it mean to shift toward the continuous understanding this week?
3. Galatians 5:22–23 gives us nine fruits by which we recognize the Spirit's work. Looking honestly at the last month, which fruit has grown most visibly in us, and which one has been most neglected? What one fruit would we ask the Spirit to ripen in us next?
4. St. Seraphim of Sarov says the aim of the Christian life is 'the acquisition of the Holy Spirit.' How does that framing reshape our understanding of spiritual disciplines — fasting, prayer, almsgiving — as means rather than as ends?
5. The Church in Acts 15:28 orders her decisions 'to the Holy Spirit, and to us.' In the area of service the Lord has given us right now, where might we have quietly reversed that order, and what would it look like to restore it this season?

Books & References

Scripture: John 14:16–18, 26; John 16:13; Acts 2:1–4; Acts 4:31; Acts 15:28; Ephesians 5:18–19; Galatians 5:22–23; 2 Timothy 1:6–7; Luke 11:13; Romans 8:14–16 (NKJV throughout)

Further Reading:

- St. Athanasius, Letters to Serapion (on the divinity and indwelling of the Spirit).

- St. Cyril of Alexandria, Commentary on the Gospel of John, on John 14.
- St. Macarius the Great, Spiritual Homilies, especially Homily VIII.
- St. Seraphim of Sarov, Conversation with Motovilov (on acquisition of the Holy Spirit).
- St. Basil the Great, On the Holy Spirit.
- Fr. Matthew the Poor, Words for Our Time (pastoral letters on the Spirit in the servant's work).

All Scripture quotations in this lesson are from the New King James Version (NKJV).

Lesson Notes