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Walk to Emmaus

Obstacles to Grace –– Jeff Belt

Please join me in the Prayer to the Holy Spirit found on page 48 of your purple worship book.

*Come Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful and kindle in us the fire of your love. Send forth your Spirit, and we shall be created. And you shall renew the face of the earth.  
O God, who by the light of the Holy Spirit did instruct the hearts of the faithful, grant that by the same Holy Spirit we may be truly wise and ever enjoy your consolations.* *Through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

Four years ago, I began to have severe pain down both legs. Over time, that pain became more predominant in my right leg. For the most part, this pain was at its worst when I would lie down to go to sleep or when I would sit down.

So , after putting up with this for several months, I finally decided that I needed to see my family physician. He told me what he thought I was dealing with, and prescribed a muscle relaxer and some pain medication. I took the meds for several months, but the pain continued, so I decided to see an orthopedic specialist in the Columbus area. The specialist examined me and asked me a variety of questions. After that, he had me have two MRIs. One of the MRIs was to take a picture of my neck area and the other was to look at my lower back. He told me that spinal stenosis is simply the narrowing of the spinal passage due to a bulging disc.

From that diagnosis, he prescribed some physical therapy that lasted over a six-week period. I went faithfully to the physical therapist for those six weeks. Since then, I must admit that I have not kept up the exercises that the therapist gave for me to do when I left his care. As a result, I still have the recurrence of sciatic nerve pain down my right leg.

Basically, in both places along my spinal column, an obstacle has occurred whereby the normal activity of my spine has become hindered or obstructed, with the result being the pain and discomfort that I have been experiencing now for the past four years.

**The name of this talk is [^] Obstacles to Grace, and my name is [^] Jeff Belt.**

What is an obstacle? Well, in my case that I just shared with you, it is an obstruction that has been and continues to cause me pain at varying degrees. Webster’s Dictionary says that an obstacle is something that blocks, hinders, or is an impediment. It is anything that obstructs or hinders that progress or flow of something.

As you are well aware, **[^] our lives as Christians take place in a real world that is affected by the consequences of sin.** With us living in the constant presence of sin, each of us experiences obstacles that hinder our spiritual growth and our relationship with Christ and with each other. **Thus, an [^] obstacle to grace is [^] anything that keeps us from enjoying the loving relationship God offers us in Christ.**

I just mentioned to you that we live in the presence of sin, but not only do we live in its presence, sin is also a part of our lives. It is at the very core of who we are as humans. It is in our very DNA.

When you look at the word **[^]** ‘sin’, what is the letter that is smack dab in the middle? Why, of course, it is the letter ‘I’.

**Sin is described as the [^] big ‘I’.** It is making me the center of the universe and the standard of goodness instead of acknowledging God as the “rightful center of all creation.” Another way of looking at this is that we focus our attention on ourselves rather than God.

**[^] Not only is sin self-centeredness, it brings about alienation;** alienation from God and from others. When we sin, when we allow these obstacles to God’s grace to be a part of our lives, we experience alienation.

In the Greek New Testament, the word for sin is **[^]** hamartia, and it comes from the world of archery and it means **“to miss the mark or target.”**

When I was in the sixth grade, I had the opportunity to attend a YMCA camp in northern Georgia. One of the classes I took was archery. This was the first time I had ever held a bow and shot arrows at a target. Needless to say, I didn’t even hit the target. I completely missed the whole thing, and probably at that time I couldn’t even hit the broad side of a barn.

The reason why I couldn’t hit the target is that I just didn’t have the strength to keep the bow steady in order to aim at the target. The arrows that I shot at the target fell short of the target; they went to the left and right of the target.

We too, as Christians, **[^] miss the mark of God’s will** as we aim too high, too low, or to the left or right. Did you know that the Apostle Paul struggled with this part of his life? He wrote about this in his letter to the Roman Christians in chapter 7, verses 15-20; that is Romans 7: 15-20. He wrote, “For what I will to do, I do not practice; but what I hate, that I do …” So you can see that even the Apostle Paul had his struggle with sin in his life.

**This sin is anything that causes us to miss the target of God’s will for our lives.**It is anything that separates us from the love of God and the love of our neighbor.  
You will find this in Matthew 22: 36-40; that is Matthew 22: 36-40.

**In a much broader sense, sin affects our lives within society as it does within our personal lives.**

**[^ blank screen]** Sin is also anything that diminishes life. Sin can be abuse of any part of God’s creation: our environment – land air, water – as well as plants, animals, and people; just to satisfy our own personal needs.

For Christians, anything less than the new creation in Jesus Christ falls short of the biblical vision. Paul, in 2 Corinthians, chapter 5, verse 17, that is 2 Corinthians 5: 17, says this to us: ”If anyone belongs to Christ, they are a new creation. The old things have gone; everything is made new.”

At the beginning of this talk, I spoke of an obstacle that has occurred in my neck and lower back region, and with it has caused me much discomfort and pain. **In our lives, there are [^] two primary types of obstacles to God’s grace and they are: [^] those that hinder our relationship with God, and [^] those that hinder our relationships with others.** In both of these areas, it can and does cause us pain and discomfort.

During this part of my talk, I want to share with you a number of these obstacles that have a profound effect upon these two areas of relationships. Please turn now to a clean sheet of paper, and I will give you some instructions as to how you will write these two lists of obstacles.

The first list will be written in a **[^]** vertical fashion, and is a list of obstacles that **[^]** hinder or affect our relationship with God. The second list of obstacles that I will give to you will be written in a **[^]** horizontal fashion and lists those obstacles that **[^]** affect our relationships with others. As I share them with you, they will appear on the screen. **[^]** Let’s begin.

1. **[^] Idolatry** – this is worshipping and serving false gods. It is worshipping or serving anything or anyone before God. Deuteronomy 5: 7-8.
2. **[^] Blasphemy** – speaking irreverently or profanely of God; using God’s name to curse or revile anyone or anything. Deuteronomy 5: 11*.*
3. **[^] Resisting God** – We know what God says to do, and we don’t want to do it. If you look at Exodus and Numbers and the Book of Acts you will see how that has worked for people in the past. In 1 Thessalonians, chapter 5, verse 19, that is 1 Thess. 5: 19, the Apostle Paul warns us to not quench the Spirit of God. Now leave a space in the middle and continue the list a little further down the page.
4. **[^] Ignoring God** – This is when we do not make time for God in our lives. It is when we give ourselves the permission to break the concept of the Sabbath for ourselves, our families, and our employees. Deuteronomy 5: 12-15.
5. **[^] Disobedience** – This is when we intentionally reject the relationship that God offers, and fail to develop the talents and abilities God has given to us. Luke 19: 11-27.
6. **[^] Unbelief** – refusing to believe and obey the truth.
7. **[^] Ignorance** – This is when we unknowingly alienate ourselves from God and others. And due to this we can become defeated. Sometimes, because we do not try to become informed about what is happening in this world, we unknowingly alienate ourselves from God and others.
8. **[^] Pride** – This is the sin that focuses attention on us rather than giving honor and glory to God. Matthew 6:5-8**.**
9. **[^] Unforgiveness towards God or others** – If we don’t forgive, we cannot be forgiven. Matthew 6: 9-15. You need to remember that forgiveness is not the same thing as forgetting.

This morning you had the opportunity to give something up, to lay down a burden, and if you were able to do that, that is wonderful. However, you may still need to work through whatever it was you gave to Christ. The Spiritual Directors are here for you to perhaps help you work through any attitude or feelings that were connected with whatever you laid down, for example, bitterness and unforgiveness. These two things are obstacles to grace in your life.

If these first obstacles get in the way of our relationship with God, the second set of obstacles **[^]** hinder or block our relationship with others.

In 2010, country artist *Jaron and the Long Road to Love* recorded the song “Pray for You”, and the first part of the song goes like this:

I haven't been to church since I don't remember when;

Things were going great, till they fell apart again.

So I listened to the preacher, as he told me what to do;

He said, “You can't go hatin' others who have done wrong to you.

Sometimes we get angry, but we must not condemn.

Let the good Lord do his job; you just pray for them.”

I pray your brakes go out runnin' down a hill.

I pray a flower pot falls from a window sill

And knocks you in the head like I'd like to.

I pray your birthday comes and nobody calls.

I pray you're flyin' high when your engine stalls.

I pray all your dreams never come true.

Just know, wherever you are, honey, I pray for you.

And, yes, the song only goes downhill from there.

Is it possible for us to think and feel like this towards others who have hurt us or wronged us? Well, what do you think? Now, here is the list of obstacles that hinder our relationships with others. Once again, please write these words horizontally on your paper starting from left to right. You will see the list on the screen.

1. **[^] Murder** – You will find in the Ten Commandments these words: “You shall not murder”, Deuteronomy 5: 17*.* Murder as defined within the Scriptures is more than a physical act because the abuse of power can wound or kill others psychologically, emotionally, and even spiritually.  
     
   Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, gives us a clearer picture of this when he said in Matthew 5: 21-22, that is Matthew 5: 21-22, “You shall not murder … but I say to you that if you are angry with a brother or sister, you will be liable to judgment; and if you insult a brother or sister, you will be liable to the council.”
2. **[^] Addiction and abuse** – Any physical abuse, substance abuse, or abusive relationship diminishes life and become an obstacle to grace. Also, any form of sexual exploitation of children, youth, and adults creates an obstacle to grace.
3. **[^] Lying** – Saying things that we know are untrue. Deuteronomy 5: 20.
4. **[^] Gossip or slander** – Saying things with the intent of hurting others. Now again, leave a space in the middle and continue the list a little further to the right.
5. **[^] Stealing** – Taking things away from those who own or deserve them. Deuteronomy 5: 19.
6. **[^] Coveting** – Refusing to be satisfied with what we have. Deuteronomy 5: 21.This can be manifested in an unhealthy desire for position, power, property or relationship that others have.
7. **[^] Laziness** – Refusing to be a good steward of the life, gifts, graces, property, and power God has entrusted to you.
8. **[^] Dishonor** – When we dishonor our parents, spouses, children, and other primary relationships in our family, we create an obstacle to grace in our prayer life, and our dishonor has consequences for generations to come. Deuteronomy 5: 16.  
   And when we dishonor our spiritual leaders, pastors, and others in positions of authority established by God, we create obstacles to grace.

Now in the middle of these two lists of obstacles to grace write these three other obstacles that are considered to be **[^]** obstacles to our relationship with ourselves.

1. **[^] Lack of love:** Refusing to love ourselves in a healthy manner so that we can love our neighbors. Mark 12: 29-34.
2. **[^] Bitterness:** is a dangerous virus of spirit that can quickly spread to others. Hebrews 12: 14-15.
3. **[^] Spiritual blindness:** As humans it is easier to someone else’s failures while missing our own. That is why Jesus said that we should take the board out of our own eye first before we attempt to take the speck out of another’s eye.

But thank the Lord, there is good news, and here it is. First, I want you to [^] draw a line around the combined lists of words that are on your paper. What do you see? What you see is the Good News. It is [^] through Jesus Christ that you and I can overcome the obstacles to God’s grace. [^] The cross of Christ covers all our sins. The cross restores our relationships with God, others, and ourselves.

[^] The vertical part of the cross reminds us that [^] Jesus Christ restores our relationship with God. Thus in Christ God has restored our relationship with him through reconciliation. Our baptism is a means by which God helps us to remember what He has done for us through the cross. And the end result of God’s work is that we recover our identity as a child of His. It is then through the power of the Holy Spirit that all of His work becomes real to us.

The horizontal part of the cross reminds us that [^] Jesus Christ restores our relationships with our neighbors and ourselves. Thus in Christ we come to truly love ourselves just as God in Christ has loved and loves us. We also begin to live out our reconciliation as we are able to be reconciled to others. But the ultimate outcome of Christ’s work is that we are able to love even our enemies.

[^] The Christian life is a daily decision to take up our cross and follow Jesus Christ. It is a life lived in the shape of the cross, with appropriate attention given to our relationships with God and our relationships with others. God’s grace is always greater than our sin. Romans 5: 20-21. No obstacle can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus. In Christ, you and I can overcome any and every obstacle to His grace.

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Song Reference

*Pray for You,* by Joel Brentlinger & Jaron Lowenstein.

Scripture References

Romans 7: 15-20

Matthew 22: 36-40

2 Corinthians 5: 17

Deuteronomy 5: 7-8

Deuteronomy 5: 11

1 Thessalonians 5: 19

Deuteronomy 5: 12-15

Luke 19: 11-27

Matthew 6: 5-8

Matthew 6: 9-15

Deuteronomy 5: 17

Matthew 5: 21-22

Deuteronomy 5: 20

Deuteronomy 5: 19

Deuteronomy 5: 21

Deuteronomy 5: 16

Mark 12: 29-34

Hebrews 12: 14-15

Romans 5: 20-21