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

Each of us has experienced God’s grace, but each of us has also stumbled over obstacles to that grace.

I want to tell you a little about my experience in handling this.

When I was a boy, I grew up in church.

I attended each week.

I even went to the Wednesday night youth meetings.

I did everything “by the book”…

Then, something happened. I should have seen it coming—well I did, but there was no way that I could prepare myself for it.

One day, I woke up, got out of bed, and realized that I was a teenager, and that I knew better than the rest of the world.

I was smarter… faster… stronger… better looking… smarter—oh wait, I said that one…

I knew what was best for me, and these rules that God gave me… well… they were fine for some people, but I was different—after all, I was smarter than everyone else.

Especially my parents.

So off I went—and I do mean off. I went off the radar, and started down a path of self gratification and self consumption.

I started smoking. I started lying. I started drinking. I started having sex.

But even worse… I stopped caring what my parents thought of me.

Here I was. I had a mom and a dad who loved me. I had a church that was concerned about me. I had a bright future ahead of me—one where God wanted me to do something for Him.

But I knew best.

I drifted only a little at first, but soon, just like a snowball careening down hill, my little indiscretions turned into an avalanche. My life had become derailed by obstacles that I put in my path which kept me from experiencing and enjoying God’s grace.

\***This talk is Obstacles to Grace, and I am** \***Matthew Van Winkle**

Our Christian life takes place in the real world—and that real world is affect by the consequences of sin.

That life is further complicated by things which interfere with our relationship with God.

We all experience them… and these complications have a name.

They are called **OBSTACLES TO GRACE**.

Here is a definition that I want you to write down:

\*An obstacle to grace is anything that keeps us from enjoying the loving relationship God offers us in Christ.

An obstacle to grace is anything that keeps us from enjoying the loving relationship God offers us in Christ.

As I said, life takes place in the real world—and that real world is affected, and filled with sin and its consequences.

\*Sin is simply understood to be self-centeredness, rather than God-centeredness.

\**Write down the word sin. Look at it. What’s in the middle?*

Some scholars have described sin as the \* “big I”

Sin is making me, myself, and I, the center of the universe and the standard for all that is good… instead of acknowledging God as the true and rightful center of all creation.

After all, Genesis 1:1 reads

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth.

…not ***Tony, Bill, or Rich***—no, it says that God did it.

Sin is alienation.

The essential nature of every obstacle to grace is experienced as alienation from God, from others, and, at times, even from ourselves.

Here is something to put in your notes…

…and it could help you the next time you play Scrabble…

...it is the Greek word for sin.

\***hamartia (h-a-m-a-r-t-i-a) (hamartia)**

It is also an archery term meaning \* “to miss the mark”

\*If we visualize a target which represents our actions, then the center—the bullseye—that would be the **WILL OF GOD**.

We can miss the mark—experience **hamartia**, by aiming too high as well as too low… aiming too far to the right, or too far to the left.

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.

See Matthew 22:36-40 (Matthew 22:36-40)

Sin is anything that diminishes life.

It is an abuse of any part of God’s creation—whether it be the land, the water, or the air.

When you have time look up Genesis 1:28-31 (Genesis 1:28-31)

For Christians, anything less than the new creation in Jesus Christ falls short of the Biblical vision that we have been given.

More information about that can be found in 2 Corinthians 5:17 (2 Corinthians 5:17) and Revelation 21:1-4 (Revelation 21:1-4)

Let’s take a few minutes and look closer at what obstacles to grace really are…

\*There are two primary types.

***Write this down!***  (Oh, and just so you know… my talk is basically one giant list, so you may want to write down, well, everything. Just what you hoped I would say, right?)

Two primary types.

1. \*Those that hinder our relationship with God.
2. \*Those that hinder our relationship with other people.

Turn in your notebook to a clean sheet of paper.

\*Near the center, I want you to make a circle—a couple of inches across.

Now… just above the circle, I want you to write the word: \*Resisting.

On the line above that, write the word: \*Blasphemy.

On the line above that, write the word: \*Idolatry.

Jump down to the line just beneath the circle.

On that line, write the word: \*Ignoring.

Beneath that, \*Disobedience.

Beneath that, \* Unbelief.

Beneath that, \*Ignorance.

Beneath that, \*Pride.

Beneath that, \*Unforgiveness.

\*These are obstacles that hinder our relationship with God.

Now… let’s talk about each of these things.

Idolatry.

This is worshiping and serving false gods.

God’s Word says in Deuteronomy 5:7-8 (Deuteronomy 5:7-8)

**You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that I sin the water under the earth.**

Blasphemy.

This is speaking irreverently or profanely of God. It is using God’s name to curse or revile anyone or anything.

The prohibition against this is found in Deuteronomy 5:11 (Deuteronomy 5:11)

Resisting.

Specifically… Resisting God.

When we refuse to obey the will of God, we are resisting God.

When we resist God, we refuse the quenching power offered through the Spirit of God.

For this, see 1 Thessalonians 5:19 (1 Thessalonians 5:19)

Ignoring.

Again, this is Ignoring God.

This is when we choose to prioritize ourselves instead of God in daily life.

It is not making time for God—and not making time for God means that we are breaking the Sabbath commandment.

Information on this can be found in Deuteronomy 5:12-15 (Deuteronomy 5:12-15)

Disobedience.

Understand that Sin is the intentional—not accidental—but intentional rejection of the relationship that God offers to us.

It also exists when we fail to develop the talents and abilities that God has given to us.

For more on this, look at Luke 19:11-27 (Luke 19:11-27)

Unbelief.

Simply put, this is refusing to believe and obey the truth that God puts before us.

Again, this is refusing to believe and refusing to obey the truth…that God puts before us.

Ignorance.

(and) let me first say that ignorance is NOT stupidity.

Ignorance is unknowingly alienating ourselves from God and others through a lack of understanding.

Folks, ignorance is deadly, and can be eternal.

Pride.

Can anyone relate to this one?

Pride exists when we focus our attention on… well… us, instead of the one who made us.

Pride exists when we are more important than giving honor and glory to God.

Jesus tries to explain this to us in his teaching of the Lord’s Prayer.

To see what he says, see Matthew 6:5-8 (Matthew 6:5-8)

Unforgiveness.

Specifically, we are referring to being unforgiving toward God or others.

Obviously none of you can relate to this… so let me explain what it means…

If we do not forgive, we cannot be forgiven.

For more on this, look up Matthew 6:9-15 (Matthew 6:9-15)

Remember…

Forgiveness is not the same as forgetting—nor does it mean that one has to remain in an abusive or hurtful relationship.

Can you relate to any of these?

Guess what? It’s time to add more words to our page!

Start just to the left of the circle you drew, and write the word \*Gossip.

To the left of that, write the word, \*Lying.

To the left of that, write \*Addiction and Abuse.

To the left of that, write \*Murder.

Now move to the right of the circle, and write the word, \*Stealing.

To the right of that, write \*Coveting.

To the right of that, write \*Laziness.

To the right of that, write \*Dishonor.

\*These are obstacles to our relationship with others; let’s look closer at each of them.

Murder.

Deuteronomy 5:17 (Deuteronomy 5:17) clearly states, *You shall not murder*. This is the command of God to man. It doesn’t get any more clear than that.

Also know this: murder is more than a physical act. It is an abuse of power, and as such, it can wound or kill others psychologically, emotionally, and spiritually in addition to physically.

Addiction and Abuse.

Here, we are talking about any physical abuse, substance abuse, or any type of abusive relationship that diminishes life.

This also includes any form of sexual abuse, adultery, promiscuity, pornography, and all forms of sexual exploitation of children, youth, and adults.

Lying.

Simply put, saying things that are untrue.

This is a big “No, no.”

See Deuteronomy 5:20 (Deuteronomy 5:20)

Gossip.

This is saying things we know to be untrue.

Stealing.

Taking things away from those who own or deserve them.

The prohibition for this is found in Deuteronomy 5:19 (Deuteronomy 5:19)

Coveting.

To covet is to refuse to be satisfied with what we have.

See Deuteronomy 5:21 (Deuteronomy 5:21)

This can be manifested in an unhealthy obsession or desire for position, power, property, or even the relationships that others have.

Laziness.

Laziness is refusing to be a good steward of the life, gifts, graces, property, and power that God has entrusted to each of us.

Dishonor.

When we dishonor our parents, spouses, children, and other primary relationships in our family, we create an obstacle to grace that affects our prayer life and the dishonor we create has consequences not only for us, but for generations to come.

When we dishonor our spiritual leaders, pastors, and others in positions of authority established by God, we create obstacles to grace.

For more about dishonor as an obstacle to grace, see Deuteronomy 5:16 (Deuteronomy 5:16).

That probably seems like a lot, doesn’t it? Well, there are also \*obstacles to our relationship with ourselves.

You will want to write these down also.

\*Lack of love (lack of love): This is refusing to love ourselves in a healthy manner so that we can love our neighbor. For this, see Mark 12:29-34 (Mark 12:29-34)

\*Bitterness (Bitterness): Bitterness is like a dangerous virus of the spirit that can quickly spread to others. More on this can be found in Hebrews 12:14-15 (Hebrews 12:14-15)

\*Spiritual Blindness (Spiritual Blindness): You can read about this in Luke 6:37-42 (Luke 6:37-42).

Now go back to the list of words I had you create earlier. If you draw a line around it, \*you will see that it forms the shape of a cross—also, in the circle that is in the middle… inside that write the words \* “Obstacles to Grace”.

Just as this cross can surround these obstacles to grace, so too can \*Christ encompass and overcome every obstacle in your life.

\*The vertical line reminds us that Jesus Christ restores our relationship with God. In Christ we:

Remember our reconciliation—that is to say, Jesus’ ministry began with the call to repentance, which is the offer of forgiveness, and the promise of eternal life. This can be found supported by Mark 1:14-15 (Mark 1:14-15).

It also helps us remember our baptism.

It helps us to recover our identity as children of God.

We center our faith in the cross of Jesus Christ because it stands as the most powerful witness to the central message of the Bible—that God created us, God loves us, and that God gave his only Son that we might have eternal life through him.

Did that last part sound familiar? If not, it is from John 3:16 (John 3:16)

(And) it also helps us to receive the power to walk in the Spirit.

The Christian life is possible if we accept the life of Jesus as a model for our own, and rely on the power of the Holy Spirit to lead us in our relationship with God.

Remember, a life in grace involves the daily practices of piety, study, and action that we have learned about this weekend.

Finally, it helps us to resist evil and renounce the forces of the evil one. This is found in James 4:7-8 (James 4:7-8)

\*The horizontal line in the cross reminds us that Jesus Christ can, and does, restore our relationship with ourselves and with our neighbors.

In Christ we:

Come to both know and love our true selves—therefore we are reconciled to ourselves.

In Christ we:

Become reconciled to our neighbors—therefore, we can love one another, living in peace, and seeking justice together.

In Christ we:

Seek spiritual guidance from others in the body of Christ.

A spiritual friend is someone who knows the pathways in a relationship with God and the obstacles to grace.

In Christ we:

Participate in all the means of grace, including a small group where there is a commitment to accountable discipleship.

In Him, we also pray for our leaders and those in authority over others. This can be found in 1 Timothy 2:1-4 (1 Timothy 2:1-14)

Also, in Christ, we need to learn to love our enemies, feed the hungry, and clothe the naked. More on this can be found in Luke 6:27-30 (Luke 6:27-30) and Matthew 25:34-40 (Matthew 25:34-40).

Okay, you can put your pens down. \*

I told you earlier that I had left the reservation… that I had wandered off the beaten path, and that I was walking further and further from God as I became caught-up by obstacles to God’s grace.

Now I am standing here in front of you as a member of the clergy. Somewhere between getting drunk, sleeping with a woman that I neither loved or respected, and lying about it after the fact, God got my attention.

I like to say that after years of speaking to me, he finally hit me up-side the head with a two-by-four. How it happened is not important. What is important though, is that I became aware that I was not the smartest… I didn’t know best… and I couldn’t do it on my own.

All of this being said, I would love to tell you that I am no longer susceptible to falling prey to the obstacles to grace, but that would be a lie—which if you remember, itself, is one of the obstacles to grace.

I did get sober. I did stop engaging in risky behavior. I did start listening to God…

But just because I am a pastor, don’t be fooled.

I still get caught up by the obstacles to grace.

To this day, my relationship with my mother is a prime example.

We have our good days, but we also have bad ones too—mostly because I have trouble forgiving her for things that she probably didn’t even do—and more often than not, I still feel like I know more than she does.

**Gentlemen**—I still have trouble with obstacles to God’s grace just like before.

The difference between now and then, is that before I didn’t care… and now I do.

Today when I find that sin is trying to control my life, I get on my knees and ask for help.

I pray to God for guidance and strength.

I pray for God to let His grace overpower any obstacle in my path.

I pray that I may become more and more and more worthy of that gift of grace.

\*De Colores.

**Scripture References:**

Genesis 1: 1

Matthew 22: 36-40

Genesis 1: 28-31

2 Corinthians 5: 17

Revelation 21: 1-4

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

Deuteronomy 5: 20

Deuteronomy 5: 19

Deuteronomy 5: 21

Deuteronomy 5: 16

Mark 12: 29-34

Hebrews 12: 14-15

Luke 6: 37-42

Mark 1: 14-15

John 3: 16

James 4: 7-8

1 Timothy 2: 1-4

Luke 6: 27-30

Matthew 25: 34-40