Emmaus Talk on “Obstacles to Grace”

New-Ark Area Emmaus Community

Given by Pastor Ed Eberhart

March 20, 2010

Ladies, please join me in the Prayer to the Holy Spirit, found on page 48 of your worship booklets.

* *Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of the 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.  Oh 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.*

Please be seated.

In beginning this talk, I’d like to share a story with you.

* **I’d like to begin with a story of three guys who die and go to Heaven. They get to the gate, and St. Peter tells them they can do whatever they want, except for one thing and one thing only: “Never EVER step on a duck, or terrible things will happen,” he says. They think this is kind of odd, but still they decide to obey him. They agree and go inside. Well, it turned out that there were ducks everywhere they looked. It was like a “duck obstacle course.” Despite his best efforts not to do so, the first guy steps on a duck the very first day in heaven. St. Peter appears with the ugliest woman in the world and straps her to the guy so that neither of them can get loose. “You will stay with this woman for eternity,” says St. Peter. The other two guys watch all this and are especially careful as they walk through heaven. Nonetheless, a few days later, the second guy steps on duck. St. Peter again appears with another ugly woman and straps her to him. “You will stay with this woman—the second ugliest woman in the world—for all eternity.” Well, the third guy figures this is for real, and he's gotta be careful, so he develops this style of walking, his feet never leave the ground. Weeks go by, and soon he gets a visit from St. Peter. “What is this?” the guy says. “I didn't do anything wrong!” Then out from behind St. Peter appears a beautiful woman. He straps them to one another and leaves. The guy says, “Any idea why he did that? I didn't do anything saintly, that I know of.” And the woman says, “I don't know about you, but I stepped on a duck.” ☺**

Ladies, you know that life is full of obstacles. And we have to watch where we step; even more, how we live. And the steps we take, as well as the choices we make, leave a lasting effect on our life—for eternity.

My name is Ed Eberhart, and the title of this talk is OBSTACLES TO GRACE. (Pause)

# GOD IS MISSING ILLUSTRATRION:

# Sometimes life is difficult, isn’t it? Sometimes it seems as if God were missing.

# Life is full of obstacles.

# When I began my life in the ministry, I quickly realized that we live in a world in which sin had affected God’s perfect plan for the world.

# Talk about my ordination on Sunday, April 18, 1999 and the ensuing events of Monday, April 19 at Columbine High School; 12 students and one teacher killed by Eric Harris and Dillon Kleibold

# The Christian life takes place in a real world that is affected by the consequences of sin.

# And that’s the first thing I want you to understand this afternoon. Please write that down in your notebook—“The Christian life takes place in a real world that is affected by the consequences of sin.”

# Suffering in the world is due to sin in the world. From the very beginning of time, it was clear that God’s perfect plan for our lives would be disrupted by the reality of sin (Garden of Eden). And as we look at our world today, it’s evident that sin continues to disrupt God’s plan for our lives and the world.

# Obstacles to grace are common. We all experience obstacles to grace; they are anything, or anyone, that keeps us from enjoying the loving relationship God offers us in Christ. The greatest obstacle to grace is SIN. I’d like to give you a concise definition of what sin is. Please write this down: Sin is self-centeredness rather than God-centeredness. (Give them time to write this down.)

**SHOW SLIDE WITH SIN WRITTEN ON IT.**

Sin has been described as the “Big I”—making myself the center of the universe rather than God. So often, we focus on ourselves rather than on God. We focus on pleasing ourselves rather than pleasing God. Sin is sowing to my flesh rather than to my spirit. It is putting my wishes above the wishes of the God who created me. And yet, John 3:30 reminds us, **“He must increase; I must decrease.”**

# Furthermore, sin is alienation (Discuss Adam and Eve hiding from God and then getting kick out of the garden as a consequence of their sin).

* The essential nature of every obstacle to grace is experienced as alienation from God, from others, and even from ourselves at times.
* SIN MEANS MISSING THE MARK: The Greek word for sin is “hamartia,” an old archery term meaning, “To miss the target.” Sin is whatever causes us to miss the target God has given our lives, which is a relationship with Him. Though the world, and each of us, has been created in the image of God, for a relationship with God, sin has gotten us off-target, and separated us from God.
* Though the world was created to be in a loving relationship with God, it’s pretty easy to see that the world is missing the mark. The events of September 11 witness to the type of world we live in. Columbine, Paducka, the list goes on and on…. Additionally, the high rate of drug use and abuse, teen suicides, the legalization of abortion, teenage pregnancies, broken homes, and many other indicators show us that we live in a world, and a society, that is missing the mark—that is on the wrong track. By simply opening the newspaper or watching the evening news, we can see that the human race has missed the mark for which it was made. It’s usually easy to see that the world is missing the mark, but it’s sometimes a little more difficult to admit that WE ARE MISSING THE MARK. Even though we have been created in the image of God, and though we have been raised to new life in Christ, we also know that all too often we continue to fall short of who God wants us to be. Romans 3:23 says, **“For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”** That means you, and it means me.

**The fact is, we all struggle with sin, throughout our lifetime.**

* **Consider the words of the Apostle Paul, one of the strongest Christians ever to live (Romans 7:15, 19-20):** “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate I do. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. Now, if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it.”
* Peter wanted to follow Jesus, as well, but still denied Christ, not once, not twice, but three times.
* Likewise, all of us, in subtle or perhaps more obvious ways, have ignored or denied the most important relationship in our life at one point or the other—and that is our relationship with God through his Son Jesus Christ. We face obstacles in our life that attempt to limit our ability to love, that hinder our growth in Christ, and cause us to doubt our faith. Because of SIN, we are all missing the mark.
* 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.
* Jesus said in John 10:10 that he came into this world so that we might have life and have it abundantly. Sin is anything that diminishes life and keeps us from the abundant life that God desires we live.

# I would like to share 2 PRIMARY TYPES OF OBSTACLES TO GRACE (Two ways we miss the mark):

1. **The first category is those that hinder our relationship with God.**

What kinds of things hinder our relationship with God? I happen to have a list. Please write these down in your notebook under the heading, “Obstacles in my relationship with God” (vertical list on board):

* + Idolatry: Idolatry is worshiping or serving false gods (small g). Many things can and do become idols in our life when we put them ahead of God.
  + Blasphemy: Blasphemy is speaking irreverently or profanely about God or using God’s name to curse anyone or anything.
  + Resisting God: Many times, we refuse to obey God’s will for our lives even when we know it’s the right thing to do.
  + Ignoring God: And at other times, we ignore God by not making time for him in our lives. He surely wants more than an hour or two on Sundays.
  + Disobedience: Disobedience is when we willfully fail to obey the commands of God, putting ourselves as the master of our lives and not God.
  + Unbelief: Unbelief is refusing to believe and/or obey the truth.
  + Ignorance: Ignorance is when we unknowingly alienate ourselves from God and others.
  + Pride: Pride is focusing attention on ourselves rather than giving honor and glory to God.
  + Unforgiveness: Friends, if we do not forgive others we cannot be forgiven by God! Forgiveness is not the same as forgetting, nor does it mean one has to remain in an abusive or hurtful relationship. *(Many of you struggle with this, and if you do I urge you to speak with one of the Spiritual Directors weekend and learn the power of forgiveness.)*

1. **A second category of obstacles to grace is the obstacles to our relationship with other people.**

Please write these down under the heading, “Obstacles in my relationship with other people” (horizontal list on board):

* Murder: The Ten Commandments say, “You shall not murder,” but Jesus said, “Anyone who is angry with his brother is subject to judgment.”
* Addiction and abuse can take many forms. Physical abuse, substance abuse (alcohol, tobacco, drugs), or even abusive relationships diminish life and become an obstacle to grace. Likewise, adultery, promiscuity, and sexual addictions such as pornography create an obstacle to God’s grace in our lives.
* Lying: Lying is saying things that we know are untrue.
* Gossip or slander: Saying things with the intent of hurting other people.
* Stealing: Taking things away from those who own or deserve them.
* Coveting: Coveting is when we refuse to be content with what we have and leads to an unhealthy desire for position, power, property, or relationships of others.
* Laziness: Refusing to be a good steward of the life, gifts, graces, property, and power God has entrusted t you.
* Dishonor: When we dishonor other people, we are creating an obstacle in our relationship with them.

**I said earlier that there were two primary categories of obstacles to grace—those that inhibit our relationship with God and those that inhibit our relationship with other people.**

**Might I suggest that there’s also a third category and that is those that block our relationship with ourselves.**

* + Lack of love: Refusing to love ourselves keeps us from truly loving others and loving the God who made us.
  + Bitterness is like a dangerous virus of the spirit that can quickly spread to others.
  + Spiritual blindness: We need to be able to see our own faults not just the faults of others.

**Yes, my friends, the reality is that we live in a sinful world that sometimes makes it very difficult for us to enjoy the life we were created to live. Sin separates us from God. That’s the bad news. But there’s good news (there usually is!):**

# The Good News is that THROUGH JESUS CHRIST WE CAN OVERCOME THE OBSTACLES TO GRACE.

# Please write that in your notebook: Through Jesus Christ, we can overcome the obstacles to grace. (As they write, draw the outline of a cross around the words to illustrate the Christ can encompass and overcome every obstacle to grace.)

# Sin is the problem; Jesus is the answer.

# Sisters, God is bigger than all our sins.

# He will walk with us; in fact, He will carry us. The grace in God is greater than the sin in us. Consider Romans 5:20, 21, “…Where sin increased, grace increased all the more, so that, just as sin reigned in death, so also grace might reign through righteousness to bring eternal life through Jesus Christ our Lord.”

# You see, God’s grace trumps our sin!

Furthermore, Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 5:21, **“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.”**

**The vertical line in the cross reminds us that Jesus Christ restores our relationship with God. In Christ, we:**

* Remember our reconciliation with God, as Jesus’ ministry began with the call to repentance, the offer of forgiveness, and the promise of eternal life.
* Remember our baptism, through which our sins were washed away by the blood of Christ.
* Recover our identity as children of God. We ARE children of God.
* Receive the power to walk in the Spirit, conquering sin.
* And in Christ we resist evil and renounce the forces of evil.

The Bible reminds us that **“greater is he who is in you than he who is in the world.”**

Near the end of their time together, Jesus told his disciples: **“In this world you have trouble. But take heart, I have overcome this world!”**

**Furthermore, the horizontal line in the cross reminds us that Jesus Christ restores our relationship with ourselves and our neighbor. In Christ, we:**

* Come to know and love our true selves.
* Become reconciled to our neighbors.
* Seek spiritual guidance from others in the body of Christ.
* Participate in the means of grace, including a small group with a commitment to accountability and discipleship.
* Pray for leaders and those in authority over us.
* And in Christ, we can love even our enemies, we can feed the hungry and we can clothe the naked (Matthew 25).

Progress in the Christian walk means falling down and getting up. Like the Energizer Bunny, we need to **keep going, and going, and going.** As long as we keep the faith, Jesus will help us overcome the obstacles we face in life.

Perhaps most of you have heard of Walter Payton. **During a Monday Night Football game between the Chicago Bears and the New York Giants, several years ago, one of the announcers observed that Walter Payton, the Bears’ Hall of Fame running back, had accumulated over nine miles in career rushing (running) yardage. The other announcer remarked, “Yeah, and that’s with somebody knocking him down every 4.6 yards.”**

Walter Payton, probably the most successful running back ever, knew well that everyone—even the very best—faces obstacles, whether that be a 300 pound lineman, a duck, or a secret sin—and because of those obstacles, we get knocked down. Walter Payton also understood that the key to success lies not in how many times one gets knocked down but in how many times one is willing to get back up and run just as hard. What defines our success in life isn’t how many obstacles we face or even how many times we get knocked down but rather how many times we get back up!

Throughout the Bible, the imagery of a RACE is used to describe the Christian life; yet, it is not a race to be first, but to finish. **The ancient Greeks had a race in their Olympic games that was unique to all others. The winner was not the runner who finished first. It was the runner who finished with his torch still it.**

Near the end of his life, Paul wrote to Timothy, **“I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day—and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for His appearing”** (2 Timothy 4:8). Paul knew that it’s not how you start in life that counts; it’s how you finish. It’s not about how many times you get knocked down, but about how many times you get up. THAT is the grace of God.

Philippians 1:6, **“…Being confident of this, that He who began a good work in you will carry it out to completion until the day of Christ Jesus.”**

# Conclusion:

Sin and grace. These are the two most important realities of life. Sin breaks life apart. Grace gives us life again. Grace reunites us with God and with one another. We can, with Christ, overcome the obstacles of sin. There is always more grace in God than there is sin in us. No obstacle can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus.

Romans 8:31, 38, 39, **“What shall we say, then, in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?…For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.”**

I’d like to close with the following story: **A few years ago at the Seattle Special Olympics, nine contestants, all physically or mentally disabled, assembled at the starting line for the 100-yard dash. At the gun, they all started out, not exactly in a dash, but with a relish to run the race to the finish and win. All, that is, except one boy who stumbled on the asphalt, tumbled over a couple of times and began to cry. The other eight heard the boy cry. They slowed down and looked back. They all turned around and went back. Every one of them. One girl with Down's Syndrome bent down and kissed him and said, "This will make it better." All nine linked arms and walked across the finish line together. Everyone in the stadium stood, and the cheering went on for several minutes. People who were there are still telling the story.**

And so, watch out for the ducks. ☺

Watch your step, because like that young boy, we too stumble and fall, and sometimes we too begin to cry, thinking we’re all alone and we’re going to lose the race. But like the other runners in this beautiful story, God comes and helps us, lifts us, and walks with us. Enjoy the journey.

De Colores!