Obstacles to Grace

WW #35, MW#29

New Ark Emmaus

*Please turn to page 48 in your Worship book and join me in the Prayer to the Holy Spirit.*

**\* The Christian life takes place in a real world affected by the consequences of sin.** Whenever we watch the news, pick up a newspaper or read a magazine, we are often overcome by the negative consequences of sin around us. We often feel overwhelmed, and the negative can even crowd out any sense of the positives. We can become depressed, anxious and fearful.

**Obstacles to grace are common.** We all experience feeling pulled in many directions by the demands of each of our lives. I don’t know about you, but I have been feeling that hours are being taken away from each day. I just can’t seem to get done what I used to. A significant obstacle for me is often the frustration I feel from the pressure of what I don’t accomplish on my “to-do” list.

Let’s look at a definition of the term **\*** “Obstacle to grace:” **\*An obstacle to grace is anything that keeps us from enjoying the loving relationship God offers us in Christ. (Repeat)**

**\***The title of this talk is Obstacles to Grace. My name is **\***Cheryl Evans.

One of the main things I want to explore in this talk is what does keep us from enjoying the loving relationship God offers us in Christ?

We cannot undertake answering that question without encountering the reality of sin. **\***The first slide with the photos from a variety of news stories, with the exception of the photo from Hurricane Katrina, were all photos of events that occurred as a result of human sin.

What is sin? **\***A concise, all-encompasing definition is that **Sin is self-centeredness, rather than God centeredness.**

**Some have described sin as the “big I”. \***This happens when I make myself the center of the universe and make myself the standard for supreme good-ness instead of acknowledging God as the rightful center of all creation.

**\*Sin is alienation.** The result of sin alienates us from God and from others in our relationships. The essential nature of every obstacle to grace is experienced as alienation from God, from others and even from ourselves at times.

I remember Sheila. She was a daughter of one of our families in the first church we served. Sheila was a frequent visitor to our home. Sheila didn’t realize that we had a bird’s eye view of her as she waited for the school bus. She would stand between the youth house and the church, thinking she was shielded from view as she smoked or downed what I can only assume was liquor from a brown paper bag. We had a clear view of that from the windows of our parsonage. I spent many hours praying for her. I remember the time she visited when she was in tears. She was an active member of the church and of our youth group. She often “preached” to the others about their behavior and what would happen as a result. She was not practicing what she preached. She spent some time that day agonizing over the difference between what she believed and what she had been doing. She felt that she had been too bad, and that God could never forgive her for all she had done. She was experiencing the full reality of the alienation that was the result of her sin.

**\*The Greek word for sin is *hamartia,* which is an archery term meaning “to miss the mark or target.”**

**What is the mark? The mark is the Will of God:** the will of God for your life. I don’t know about you, but I have often agonized about what the will of God is for my life. There were many plans for my life, most of them not mine; but my parents, or a teachers. As I tried to walk the path set before me by others, one door after another shut in my face. I was confused, depressed and frustrated, to say nothing of unemployed from time to time. Finally I heard a Christian speaker say that “The Will of God is written on the innermost recesses of your heart. It is where your own need and the world’s need meet.” That moment was a revelation for me, and I began to reflect on what was written on my heart, what was my deepest desire for my life. I’ll share more about that in a moment.

**We can miss the mark in any direction, \*by aiming too high, as well as too low, or too far to the right as well as 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 (Matt. 22: 36-40).**

In a broader sense, sin is anything that diminishes life. Jesus said “I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly.” (John 10:10) Anything that causes us to live a diminished life is sin.

**Sin can be an abuse of any part of God’s creation**—the land, water or air, as well as plants, animals and people (Gen. 1:1-31)

**For Christians, anything less than the new creation in Jesus Christ falls short of the biblical vision: (2 Cor 5:17, Rev. 21:1-4)**

**\*There are two primary types of obstacles to grace: those that hinder our**

**relationship with God and those that hinder our relationship with other people.**

1. **\***Obstacles to our relationship with God:

**\***Idolatry, **\***blasphemy, **\***resisting, **\***ignoring, **\***disobedience, **\***unbelief, **\***ignorance, **\***pride, **\***unforgiveness.

1. **\***Obstacles to our relationship with others:

**\***Murder, **\***addiction and abuse, **\***lying, **\***gossip, **\***stealing, **\***coveting, **\***laziness, **\***dishonor

We may need some definitions of a few of these terms in order to be clear.

* + Idolatry- worshipping and serving false gods (Deut 5:7-8)
  + Blasphemy- speaking irreverently or profanely of God; using God’s name to curse or revile anyone or anything (Deut 5:11)
  + Resisting God- refusing to obey the will of God; quenching the Spirit of God (I Thess 5:19)
  + Ignoring God—not making time for God in our lives, thereby breaking the Sabbath for ourselves, our families and our employees (Deut. 5:12-15)
  + Disobedience- sin is intentionally rejecting the relationship that God offers and failing to develop the talents and abilities God has given us (Luke 19:11-27)
  + Unforgiveness toward God or others—if we do not forgive, we cannot be forgiven (Matt 6:9-15). Note that forgiveness is not the same as forgetting, and it does not mean that anyone has to remain in an abusive or hurtful relationship.
  + Murder is more than a physical act. The abuse of power can wound or kill others psychologically, emotionally and even spiritually.
  + Addiction and abuse can take many forms. Any physical abuse, substance abuse or abusive relationship diminishes life and becomes an obstacle to grace. Any form of sexual abuse—adultery, promiscuity, pornography and all forms of sexual exploitation of our children, youth and adults creates an obstacle to Grace (Deut. 5:18, Matt 5:27-30)
  + Gossip or slander is saying things with the intent of hurting others. Gossip usually means saying things without really knowing if they are true. A great deal of harm can come from that.
  + Coveting means refusing to be satisfied with what we have. This can be manifested in an unhealthy desire for position, power, property or relationships that other people have.
  + Laziness means refusing to be a good steward of the life, gifts, graces, property and power God has entrusted to you.
  + 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 (Deut 5:16) When we dishonor our spiritual leaders, pastors and others in positions of authority established by God, we create obstacles to grace.

So far, we have taken a brief look at the obstacles in our relationships with God and with others, but it is also important to look at the **\***obstacles to our relationship with ourselves.

* **\***Lack of love—refusing to love ourselves in a healthy manner so that we can love our neighbor (Mark 12:29-34)
* **\***Bitterness, which is like a dangerous virus of the spirit that can quickly spread to others (Heb.12: 14-15)
* **\***Spiritual blindness (Luke 6:37-42) This passage speaks of judging. I thought it was interesting that my daughter sent me an email recently. I quote: “I’m finishing up my reading assignments for tonight, and I’m reading a chapter about the “Judging Mind” in a book about meditation called A Gradual Awakening by Stephen Levine. This short paragraph just blew my mind! : “Christ said, ‘Judge not lest ye be judged,’ The more we exercise the judging mind on others the more forcefully the judging mind will be encouraged to appraise each of our actions. The best means of defusing the judging mind is simply to non-judgmentally recognize it as it occurs.” I’ve always read that verse in terms of the Last Days and being judged by God, but I never made the connection that whenever I judge others, I’m building a destructive mind habit that can turn against me as well!”

Well, we certainly have focused on a lot of negatives so far, and I’ll bet you are feeling a bit overwhelmed. Don’t despair—here’s the good news!

First: remember that an obstacle BY DEFINITION can be overcome. It is an obstacle, not a barrier.

**Second: Through Jesus Christ \*we can overcome the obstacles to grace.** The vertical line in the cross reminds us **\***that Jesus Christ restores our relationship with God. In Christ we:

1. Remember our reconciliation—Jesus’ ministry began with the call to repentance, the offer of forgiveness, and the promise of eternal life (Mark 1:14-15)
2. Remember our baptism
3. 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: God created us, God loves us, and God gave His only Son that we might have eternal life (John 3:16)
4. Receive the power to walk in the Spirit. The Christian life is possible if we accept the life of Jesus as our model and rely on the power of the Holy Spirit to lead us in our relationship with God. A life in grace involves the daily practices of piety, study and action that we have learned about this weekend.
5. Resist evil and renounce the forces of the evil one (James 4: 7-8)

**\***In 1984, when I attended the Walk to Emmaus as a pilgrim, it was quite an experience. I was the mother of four small children, including a set of twins, and my husband was the senior pastor of the Broad Street United Methodist Church in downtown Columbus. At some point during the walk, I realized that I had completely lost my self. If someone had asked me where I wanted to go for lunch, I could not have answered that question. I did what was required of me, and had no idea that my life was my own. I thought my life belonged to everyone else—not to me. My husband’s secretary bugged me for a very long time about taking this step. What finally got through to me was when she said “This is just something you need to do for yourself.” I figured if someone else was going to do all the cooking and cleaning for the weekend, I didn’t care if they talked about baseball! I needed the rest. HA!!

I was wrestling with how to sum up my journey, with all its many obstacles and make the point I want to leave you with, without taking way too much time. I took a break, and checked my email. One of my dear friends who sat at the table with me during my walk had sent me a story. It is a perfect closing, and sums up my story and makes the point of this talk perfectly, so I close with this:

**The Quilt**

**As I faced my Maker at the last judgment**, I knelt before the Lord along with all the other souls. Before each of us was laid our lives, like the squares of a **\***quilt in many piles. An angel sat before each of us sewing our quilt squares together into a tapestry that would represent our life.

As my angel took each piece of cloth off the pile, I noticed how ragged and empty each of my squares was. They were filled with giant holes. Each square was labeled with a part of my life that had been difficult, the challenges and temptations I was faced with in every day life. I saw the hardships that I had endured, which were the largest holes of all. I glanced around me. Nobody else had such squares. Other than a tiny hole here and there, the other tapestries were filled with rich color and the bright hues of worldly fortune. I gazed upon my own life and was disheartened. My angel was sewing the ragged pieces of cloth together, threadbare and empty. It was like binding air.

Finally the time came when each life was to be displayed, held up to the light: the scrutiny of truth. The others rose; each in turn, holding up their tapestries. So filled their lives had been. My angel looked upon me, and nodded for me to rise. My gaze dropped to the ground in shame. I hadn't had all the Earthly fortunes. I had love in my life, and laughter. But there had also been trials of illness, loss of wealth, and false accusations that took from me my world, as I knew it. I had to start over many times. I often struggled with the temptation to quit, only to somehow muster the strength to pick up and begin again. I spent many nights on my knees in prayer, asking for help and guidance in my life. I had often been held up to ridicule, which I endured painfully, each time offering it up to the Father in hopes that I would not melt within my skin beneath the judgmental gaze of those who unfairly judged me. Now, I had to face the truth. My life was what it was, and I had to accept it for what it was. I rose and slowly lifted the combined squares of my life to the light. An awe-filled gasp filled the air. I gazed around at the others who stared at me with wide eyes. Then, I looked upon the tapestry before me. Light flooded the many holes, creating an image, the face of Christ. Then our Lord stood before me, with warmth and love in His eyes**. He said**, "Every time you gave over your life to Me, it became My life, My hardships, and My struggles. Each point of light in your life is when you stepped aside and let Me shine through, until there was more of Me than there was of you." **\***May all our quilts be threadbare and worn, allowing Christ to shine through!

**\*DeColores!**

Matthew 22: 36-40

Genesis 1: 1-31

1 Thessalonians 5: 19

Deuteronomy 5: 7-8

Deuteronomy 5: 11

2 Corinthians 5: 17

Revelation 21: 1-4

Deuteronomy 5: 12-15

Luke 19:11-2

Matthew 6: 9-15

Deuteronomy 5: 16

Deuteronomy 5: 18

Matthew 5: 27-30

Mark 12: 29-34

Hebrews12: 14-15

Luke 6: 37-42

Mark 1: 14-15

James 4: 7-8