Obstacles to Grace – Eva Marie Wolfe

**[^ blackscreen ]** Please remain standing, and join me in the prayer to the Holy spirit found on page 48 of your purple worship book.

**Prayer to the Holy Spirit**

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.

You may be seated.

I remember when God wanted to me to accept a certain kind of grace – the grace of ordination as a minister - and how *resistant* I was to receiving that grace.

For many years I refused to listen to God’s call to that particular form of grace, and finally God chose another way – a new tactic, you might say – to encourage me to align *my* will for my life with *God’s* will for my life.

God approached me where my defenses were lowest – with regard to my children. I had three children at home, and the birth of my youngest had increased the pace of my life considerably. With three kids each 4-1/2 years apart in age and my husband and I both holding full-time jobs – we were busy, to say the least. God started working on my heart that I should stay at home with my children. God increased my unease about their situations in day care and the demands on my time as they each pulled me in a different direction. I found people were talking to me about their own thoughts and choices about caring for *their* children—people who I’d never had that kind of discussion with before.

So I moved to accept God’s will—slowly! I spent a year thinking about it – I read three books on reducing family income from two incomes to one. I *wrestled* with the idea. What if I quit work, and my husband died? What if he left me? I wasn’t planning on either of those things happening, but I knew other women who weren’t planning on those things happening either—but they did. I begged God daily for a sign that I was hearing things right – to just beat me over the head with a plain statement that would remove my doubt - until one day, when I pulled into the daycare to pick up *two* of my children – with that gap in their ages, there wasn’t anywhere I could put the three of them together—the daycare center was in a church, and when I pulled up, I saw their sign had been changed – that day it read, “Looking for a sign from God?—here it is!”

Through persistence, God finally wore me down, and –you think I’m going to say I quit my job, aren’t you?—but I didn’t trust God quite that much even then—what I *did* do was arrange to reduce my hours to 15 hours a week, and to work half of them from home. That was as far as I was willing to go. But it was enough for God to start working on me, and reveal the full reason I had been called to go home – so I would have space in my life to LISTEN to God – and God then said to me, “I want you to learn everything you can about me, and then I want you to teach it to others.”

My obstacle to grace was that I was *too busy* to listen to God. God had to move me away from life as I knew it so I could enter into life as *God* knew it could be.

The title of this talk is **[^]** Obstacles to Grace, and my name is **[^]** Eva Marie Wolfe.

I will tell you that there are a lot of Scripture references in this talk. Don’t worry if you don’t get them all written down, because you will be receiving a handout that has them all listed.

\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

1. Ladies, t**he [^]** **Christian life takes place in a real world affected by the consequences of sin.** I will repeat that: The Christian life takes place in a real world affected by the consequences of sin. It doesn’t take place in a vacuum – we don’t live in the Garden of Eden – we don’t live in a cloistered monastery – we live right in the midst of the world, with all its tendency toward sin.
2. As a result, **[^]** obstacles to grace are **common –** we’ve all experienced them. We *want* perfect peace and perfect love and that real shalom which is a wholeness and a completeness in our lives, but most of us don’t seem to get there. Why not? There are two considerations:
3. We *all* experience obstacles to grace. As I said before, they are *common*. We have *different* obstacles, but we all *have* obstacles;
4. We need to realize that **[^]** **an obstacle to grace is *anything* that keeps us from enjoying the loving relationship God offers us in Christ.** It might not be a bad thing to someone else, but to us it is an obstacle, like my job had become to me.
5. If we acknowledge that we live in a real world, affected by the consequences of sin, we need to realize some things about **[^]** sin. First and foremost is that **sin is [^]** **self-centeredness, rather than God-centeredness**. This is a big one, so I will repeat that. Sin is *self-centeredness* rather than *God centeredness*.

Some have described sin as the **[^]** “big I” – making myself, “I,” the center of the universe and the standard for supreme goodness, instead of acknowledging *God* as the rightful center of all creation – taking our focus away from *God* and onto *ourselves – [can use graphic of sIn] – self-centeredness instead of God-centeredness.*

1. Another thing to recognize is that **[^]** **sin is *alienation*.** That’s the exact *opposite* of the nature of God, who lives in Trinity – God’s very nature is close-knit community. Sin is a separation from community.
2. We need to understand that the essential nature—the common denominator—of every obstacle to grace is an alienation. Alienation occurs on three levels – alienation from God, alienation from others, and even alienation from ourselves. We will talk more about that later.
3. Now, I want to teach you a Greek word - the Greek word for sin. That word is **[^]** ***hamartia****,* which is actually an archery term meaning **“to miss the mark or target.”** Harmartia – to miss the mark or target.

When I think hitting the mark, I think about my son, when he was at Boy Scout camp, working on his rifle shooting merit badge. To earn it, he had to hit a target five times in a space the size of a quarter. That seems like a *very small mark* to me, but that’s what’s required, and many boys have earned that merit badge, so it *must* be possible. **[^]** Sometimes the will of God seems *that* hard to hit to us, but I *know* it’s possible.

Let’s look more closely at *hamartia*, missing the mark, as it relates to sin:

1. First, notice that **[^]** **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. We can miss the mark in any direction.

In Joshua 1:6-8, Joshua 1:6-8, God encouraged Joshua to hit the mark, when he became leader of the Israelites, to follow the law of Moses, not to deviate to the left or to the right, but to stay on the course that Moses had set –to hit the target as surely as any young would-be marksman could. Be patient, Joshua, and take good, steady aim.

In Luke 18:18-25, Luke 18:18-25, someone who *did* miss the mark was the certain ruler who came to Jesus and asked what he should do to be saved. He knew and followed the law. Jesus told him to leave everything he had and follow him, and this the man could *not* do, because his possessions were more important to him than God’s will for his life.

1. Second, **Sin is [^]** **anything that causes us to miss the target of God’s will for our lives.** I repeat: **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. In Matt 22:36-40, Matt 22:36-40, When Jesus was asked what was the greatest commandment, he answered, "'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' 38 This is the greatest and first commandment. 39 And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' 40 On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." Anything that keeps us from loving God and neighbor is sin.

Susannah Wesley was the mother of John Wesley, the founder of the Methodist movement. She was an incredible woman, and she gave one of the best definitions of sin that I’ve ever heard. She said—and this is kind of archaic language to us now, but you will understand the essence of it: “Take this rule: whatever weakens your reason, impairs the tenderness of your conscience, obscures your sense of God, or takes off the relish of spiritual things; in short, whatever increases the strength and authority of your body over mind, **that thing is sin to you**, however innocent it may be in itself.”

**[^]** **Sin is personal for each one of us, and it can be different for each one of us.** If something causes you to miss the target of God’s will for your life, *it’s sin to you.* If it keeps you from receiving the full measure of God’s grace, and God’s love, and from giving and sharing God’s love, it is sin *to you*.

1. In a broader sense, **[^]** **Sin is anything that diminishes life.** I repeat: Sin is anything that diminishes life.
2. Sin can be an abuse of any part of God’s creation – the land, water, or air, as well as plants, animals, and people. In G*en 1:1-31, Gen 1:1-31,* God created everything on earth and in heaven, and declared it all to be good. Who are we to abuse or misuse anything that God has declared to be good?
3. For Christians, anything less than the new creation in Jesus Christ falls short of the biblical vision. *In 2 Cor 5:17, 2 Cor 5:17* Paul writes, “So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!”

We see this thought again in Rev 21:1-4, Rev 21:1-4, especially in verse 4, when John writes*, [God] will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.".* This is the new creation in Christ.

1. Earlier, I said that the common denominator of every obstacle to grace is alienation, and that alienation occurs on three levels. Let’s explore that further by looking at the [^] three types of obstacles to grace:

A) those that [^] hinder our relationship with God;

B) those that [^] hinder our relationship with other people, and

C) those that [^] hinder our relationship with ourselves.

We are going to be looking at these three types one at a time and will be making three lists. The hope is that we will end up with a pictograph, which is a pictorial representation, to help us remember these, so please start a fresh page for your notes on these obstacles to grace.

1. There are probably a countless number of obstacles to **[^]** our relationship with God, but today we are going to name nine major obstacles to grace. You will want to list these vertically, leaving a space after the third one, as shown on the screen:
2. **[^]** Idolatry – worshipping and serving false gods *(Deut 5:7-8 [you shall have no other gods before me])*  Not just if we decide to worship Zeus or Thor. We can worship money, or drugs, or alcohol, or wasteful use of our time – anything we elevate above God become an idol to us
3. **[^]** Blasphemy – speaking irreverently or profanely of God; using God’s name to curse or revile anyone or anything *(Deut 5:11 [You shall not make wrongful use of the name of the LORD your God…])*  Isn’t it ironic that the very name that blesses us is used by human beings to curse others!
4. **[^]** Resisting God – refusing to obey the will of God; quenching the Spirit of God *(1 Thess 5:19*) Paul tells the Thess, “Do not quench the Spirit.” – don’t douse it out

[Leave a space here in your notes]

1. **[^]** Ignoring God – This was my obstacle to grace that I shared with you earlier - not making time for God in our lives, thereby breaking the sabbath for ourselves, our families, and our employees *(Deut 5:12 [Observe the sabbath day and keep it holy, as the LORD your God commanded you…])* God made us – so God knows we need a day of rest, and that it is bad for us not to take a break and be refreshed, and turn to God. Rest is holy. Mark tells us (Mark 2:27) that Jesus said, “The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the Sabbath.” The Sabbath was made for our *benefit*. Go ahead and take it.
2. **[^]** 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 – parable of the talents)* – those who increased their talents were rewarded and the one who did not was punished - There is an old saying: What you are is God’s gift to you; what you become is your gift to God.” It is our right and our obligation to develop the gifts God gives us and use them to God’s glory.
3. **[^]** Unbelief – refusing to believe and obey the truth. – be careful not to interpret God’s Word wrongly because your personal interpretation fits what you *want* to believe – instead, believe and obey the truth, even if it’s a difficult truth for you.
4. **[^]** Ignorance – unknowingly alienating ourselves from God and others. Our lack of understanding can defeat us. Just because we don’t *know* a law doesn’t excuse us from the need to obey it. If you don’t believe that, ask my daughter who lost her driver’s license for a month one summer because she thought she was driving 56 mph in a *55* mph zone, but it was really a *35* mph zone.
5. **[^]** Pride – focusing attention on *ourselves* rather than giving honor and glory to God (Matt 6:5-8*"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites...)* We tend to want to applaud ourselves for our accomplishments, rather than give the glory to God. That may be why Jesus said it was hard for the rich to get into heaven – they may choose to congratulate *themselves* for gaining what they have, instead of humbly thanking God for blessing them materially.
6. **[^]** Unforgiveness toward God or others – if we do not forgive, we cannot be forgiven. When Matthew records the Lord’s prayer in his gospel, in Chapter 6:9-15, he includes, *(Matt 6:9-15* ***)*** “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors.”
7. Please note that forgiveness is not the same as forgetting, nor does it mean one has to remain in an abusive or hurtful relationship. Forgiveness is letting go of the things that hold us back from healing or from being healed.
8. I’d like to encourage you to please speak to one of the Spiritual Directors if bitterness or unforgiveness is an obstacle to grace in your life.
9. The second type of obstacles to grace are obstacles to our **[^]** relationship with others. We will name eight of these. You should list these horizontally, again leaving a space in the middle of the list, where they intersect with the first list - again, you can look on the screen.
10. **[^]** Murder - The Ten Commandments say clearly, “You shall not murder” *(Deut 5:17).* You may not *think* you’ve ever murdered someone, or witnessed a murder, but murder is more than a *physical* act. Among other things, murder can be an abuse of power. Power is held by teachers, bosses, parents, spouses, and others. The abuse of power can wound or kill others psychologically, emotionally, and even spiritually. *Many* of us know the pain caused by power being used against us, and how that can work to destroy our spirits.
11. **[^]** Addiction and abuse –these can take many forms. Physical abuse, substance abuse, abusive relationships, any form of sexual abuse – *all* of these diminish life and become an obstacle to grace.
12. **[^]** Lying – saying things that we know are untrue (*Deut. 5:20 [Neither shall you bear false witness against your neighbor.])* Lying breaks down trust and often forces us into a continual cycle of lies.
13. **[^]** Gossip or slander – saying things with the intent of hurting others. The very *purpose* of gossip or slander is to make ourselves feel better by putting *down* other people. It’s a *self*-defeating action, because we belittle *ourselves* as well as others when we do this.
14. **[^]** Stealing – taking things away from those who own or deserve them *(Deut 5:19* [*Neither shall you steal.])* Can be physical stealing of things, or even of ideas.
15. **[^]** Coveting – refusing to be satisfied with what we have *(Deut 5:21).* This can be manifested in an unhealthy desire for position, power, property or relationship that others have. It’s more than just wanting what someone else has. Coveting causes us to be eaten up by and consumed with jealousy.
16. **[^]** Laziness – refusing to be a good steward of the life, gifts, graces, property, and power God has entrusted to you. It’s a misuse and an underutilization of those things. It’s like being underemployed. There’s something better for you, but you just don’t have it.
17. **[^]** Dishonor
18. 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. *Sin* definitely carries down to future generations. I know you’ve seen it. It’s hard for people to overcome the situations they’ve been handed by their families, those very persons who should be wanting the best for them. *(Deut 5:16 Honor your father and your mother…)*
19. We also dishonor our spiritual leaders, pastors, and others in positions of authority established by God. In those situations, too, we create obstacles to grace – we can create strife in our church family and cause a lot of pain.
20. The third and final type of obstacles to grace is obstacles in **[^]** our relationship with ourselves. There are three obstacles, and these three we will write in the intersection of the vertical and horizontal lines.
21. **[^]** Lack of love – refusing to love ourselves in a healthy manner so that we can love our neighbor . I was once in a women’s group called J-O-Y, which stood for Jesus-Others-You – order of our priorities - *except* we need healthy love and care for ourselves – airplane – depressurization – oxygen masks for ourselves, then young and elderly companions.
22. **[^]** Bitterness is like a dangerous virus of the spirit that can quickly spread to others *(Heb 12:14-15 […15 See to it that… no root of bitterness springs up and causes trouble, and through it many become defiled.])* Bitterness makes it hard to forgive others – it eats you up and makes you useless to yourself and to other people – even innocent bystanders suffer from *our* bitterness
23. **[^]** Spiritual blindness *(Luke 6:37-42)* Luke tells us that Jesus asks, "Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit?” We must first remove the causes of our own spiritual blindness, then we can help others remove theirs.
24. After writing down all of these difficult and thorny issues that we all have to deal with, I know you are ready for some good news, and I am glad to tell you that there *is* really *good* news. The good news is this: [^] Through Jesus Christ we can overcome the obstacles to grace. I will repeat that. Through Jesus Christ we can overcome the obstacles to grace.

At this time, you can, if you wish, [^] draw a cross around the obstacles to grace that you have listed to remind yourself that Jesus overcomes these obstacles.

1. The vertical line in the cross reminds us that [^] Jesus Christ restores our relationship with God. I will repeat that. The vertical line in the cross reminds us that Jesus Christ restores our relationship with God.

The cross of Jesus is the bridge between us and God.

1. [^] In Christ, we [^] 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 Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, 15and saying, "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.").*
2. Also, in Christ, we [^] remember our baptism, when we first accepted the grace of God.
3. Third, in Christ, we [^] 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 in God’s image, God loves us, and God gave God’s only Son that we might have eternal life *(John 3:16).*
4. Fourth, in Christ, we [^] receive the power to walk in the Spirit.
5. 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.
6. A life in grace involves the daily practices of piety, study and action that we are learning about this weekend. Bishop Reuben Job used to say we do these things so we can “stay in love with God.” You can’t stay in love with someone if you don’t keep in touch with them and nurture that relationship.
7. Finally, in Christ we [^] resist evil and renounce the forces of the evil one (James 4:7-8 [*Resist the devil, and he will flee from you.])*
8. The *horizontal* line in the cross reminds us that [^] Jesus Christ restores our relationship with ourselves and with others. I will repeat that. Jesus Christ restores our relationship with ourselves and with others.
9. [^] In Christ, we come to know and love our true selves; therefore, [^] we are reconciled to ourselves. Jesus sees us as we truly are and loves us anyway; therefore, we can see *ourselves* as we truly are, and love ourselves anyway.
10. Second, through Christ we [^] become reconciled to our neighbors; when we do that, we can love one another, live in peace, and seek justice together.
11. Third, in Christ, we [^] seek spiritual guidance from others in the body of Christ. We don’t have to do it alone. We can, and should, partner with a spiritual friend who knows the pathways in a relationship with God and the obstacles to grace. A spiritual friend is someone who walks along with us on our spiritual journey and helps us discern the will of God. *We* can be a spiritual friend to someone *else* as well.
12. Fourth, in Christ, we [^] participate in all the means of grace, including a small group where there is commitment to accountable discipleship, as we do in the Emmaus community.
13. Fifth, in Christ, we [^] pray for leaders and those in authority over us, and that includes secular leaders, as well as our spiritual leaders.Paul writes about prayer for leaders in (1 Timothy 2:1-4) [“supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings [should] be made for everyone, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, so that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life in all godliness and dignity.”]
14. Finally, in Christ, we [^] love our enemies *(Luke 6.27-30 ["But I say to you that listen, Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you,…)]and* [^] care for others *,* *(Matt 25:34-40… [for I was hungry…])*
15. Conclusion

[^ blank screen ] In conclusion, as Jesus told his disciples, (Matt 16:24) "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” The Christian life is a daily decision to take up our cross and follow Jesus Christ. This is a life lived in the shape of the cross, with appropriate attention given to our relationship with God and our relationship with others.

The good news is that Christians can live with the assurance that there is always more grace in God than there is sin in us *(Romans 5:20-21)* *[but where sin increased, grace abounded all the more…]* Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus *(Rom.8:38-39)* In Christ, we can overcome every obstacle to grace.

[^] De Colores! [^ blackscreen ]

Scripture References

Joshua 1: 6-8

Luke 18: 18-25

Matthew 22: 36-40

Genesis 1: 1-31

2 Corinthians 5: 17

Revelation 21: 1-4

Deuteronomy 5: 7-8

Deuteronomy 5: 11

1 Thessalonians 5: 19

Deuteronomy 5: 12

Mark 2: 27

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

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

Matthew 16: 24

Romans 5: 20-21

Romans 8: 38-39