

Grace IV - Obstacles to Grace

This is the fourth Grace talk given by a Spiritual Director on the weekend. The candidates have now been presented with each leg of the tripod: Piety, Study, and Action. They will soon be hearing that they are called to be leaders in their environments. The presence of God's grace is now understood and has been experienced as we move toward the evening of the second day. Candidates may now be questioning whether or not they have the nerve or the ability to pursue this kind of life in the face of real or imagined difficulties that they will face after the weekend.

This should be a realistic and positive talk, maybe even humorous at times as we realize our human foibles and fragility (pastors too). Yes, there are some fundamental obstacles in the life of grace, and we want to deal with them here. We want the candidates to see that sin, for which we bear responsibility, permeates our thoughts and actions. The devil, the world and our own flesh seek to trip us up. We want them to be assured that Christ has overcome these forces, that we have forgiveness when we stumble, and he has promised to give us victory over them.

40-45 minutes

- I. A possible introduction
 - a. The title of this talk is Obstacles to Grace. We have seen that God's love for us is habitual – it is part of God's nature. God has revealed in Christ this permanent, personal, unconditional love relationship with you. our piety and study can deepen this relationship each day. We have considered how God continues to make his grace available to us to strengthen our resolve to live as Christians. We have realized that to remain vital our faith has to be active in love.
 - b. All this grace talk! If God really loves us so much and literally showers us with so much grace, why isn't it a reality in everyone's life? Good question – and that's what this talk this afternoon is about. Obstacles – the Obstacles of Grace.
 - c. According to Webster's, an obstacle is "anything that gets in the way or hinders." It need not be insurmountable, but it can be discouraging and distract from moving ahead. Think of some obstacles some familiar figures faces: Don Quixote's windmill, Abraham and Lot trying to settle Palestine (water, pasture, dividing of territory), Moses and the Children

of Israel facing the Red Sea, Noah and his ark (naysayers, animals, sewage).

- d. In this talk we will face the ultimate obstacle, for which we are responsible: SIN

II. God's Plan

- a. God's Ideal
 - i. A perfect creation (Genesis 1 – and it was good)
 - ii. Humankind, created in God's image: free, thinking, caring, compassionate, loving, spiritual, rational (and it was very good)
- b. God gives the creation into our care and safe-keeping
 - i. God gave everything – existence, personality, the world
 - ii. God placed us into the world to enjoy it – not to assume its ownership
 - iii. God gave natural, physical laws to which all creation is subject
- c. God's intent was to live in relationship with humankind
 - i. Genesis – God walks in the garden
 - ii. Established some spiritual laws to govern our relationship with him – they were gifts, not burdens and life in grace depends upon them
 - 1. St. Augustine understood it: “My heart is restless, O God, until it finds it's rest in thee.”
 - iii. What stands in the way of this satisfying relationship and life?

III. Our Sin

- a. Definition
 - i. Disobedience to God
 - ii. Doing what we want to do rather than what God wants
 - iii. Placing ourselves at the center of the universe – wanting to be equal with God (goes right back to the garden)
- b. Sin as Obstacle: whatever keeps us from being what we truly are
 - i. Forgetting that we are creatures of God – Adam forgot, Cain forgot, Judas forgot, as did Peter
 - ii. Being unwilling to be who we are – the Pharisees tried to live life so perfectly they built walls around themselves
 - iii. Being afraid to be who we are – “I tried, I failed, it's no use.”
 - iv. Not caring who or whose we are
- c. Sin's environment (the terrible trinity)

- i. The devil – the personification of the forces of evil that tempt us. We still decide. We cannot say, “the devil made me do it.”
 - ii. The world – the mores and ethics of society are opposed to the Word – give examples
 - iii. The flesh – that rebellious part of us rejects God’s claim upon us
- d. Our sinful self as the obstacle
 - i. Personal sin is real. It is a part of our rebellion
 - ii. Evil in the world results from ours and everyone else’s sin magnified
 - iii. God didn’t create sin, but has given us the answer to its power over us

IV. God’s remedy

- a. Jesus Christ’s life-giving death and resurrection
 - i. Cleanses us from all sin
 - ii. Frees us to be ourselves, sinful or good – we are both saint and sinner
 - iii. Allows us to take ourselves less seriously
- b. Repentance – Matthew 4:17
 - i. Jesus came to call us to genuine repentance – not just feeling guilty
 - ii. This is metanoia – a changed mind (it may not be emotional at all)
 - 1. Causes us to reconsider our purpose and strategy for living
 - 2. Brings us to change our thinking – being transformed by renewing our minds – Romans 12
 - 3. Stirs us to change our living patterns and choices
 - iii. This is not our work – it is the work of the Holy Spirit
- c. Confession
 - i. We sin but we also have an answer
 - ii. There is freedom in confession and power in absolution
 - iii. Our sins are removed as far as the east is from the west and to be remembered no more
- d. Living a grace filled life
 - i. Live each day in an increasingly closer relationship with Christ – Piety
 - ii. Enrich your understanding – Study
 - iii. Step out in boldness to make a difference in the lives of others – Action

V. Conclusion

- a. Obstacles? What obstacles? Christ died for us and took our sin upon him when he died. As a free gift to us, he removed the only true obstacle we have to living an abundant, grace filled life – our sinful self. We can now truly love ourselves, we can overcome our stumbling in the light of God's forgiveness, and we can be a part of the ministry of reconciliation for others. Sounds like a great life to me.
- b. God loves you and so do I!