

Obstacles

Perhaps when you were younger you tried that trick of running up an escalator going down. That amazing feeling of pouring energy in, but getting nowhere, is all too familiar to us in other areas of our lives. Perhaps it is what we feel entering a new year!

We may feel like we expend much effort, but are not making much progress in our Christian lives. Why is it that day after day, week after week, and yes, year after year, we find ourselves plodding along with the same old failures, never seeming to 'break through' to the deeper Christian life others are talking about? What is it that is holding us back?

2 Peter 1:3 tells us that *"His divine power hath given unto us all things that pertain unto life and godliness."* In other words, a failure to live the Christian life is not a failure on God's part to provide the resources to do so. Everything we need to live the kind of life that pleases God has been provided for. So then, the fault must clearly be with those responsible for using God's resources of grace, not with God for not providing adequately. But if we have been so fully equipped to live this Christian life, why do we still fail?

I believe four hurdles obstruct us from truly becoming more like Christ. **Romans 8:29** tells us this is God's goal for us – to become more like His Son Jesus, thereby glorifying Him as the model of perfection that we strive for. Four major sins obstruct our progress toward the mark, the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. What are those hurdles?

1. Hurdle #1 – Idolatry

Idolatry is simply preferring something or someone above God. It means we go to those people or things for happiness, for sustenance, for guidance. We prefer them in dependence, in delight, in adoration. Idolatry is when God's creatures substitute a created thing for the Creator. We give the First One second place, or third, or worse.

All men seek happiness. This is without exception. The drive of our lives is a pursuit of ultimate happiness. There is nothing wrong with this – it is a God-given drive. Idolatry is wicked because it seeks happiness apart from acknowledging God. In other words, we want the things God gives us to make us happy, but without any reference to the Giver of those things.

Our ultimate happiness is to be God Himself, and when we look for our highest joys and fulfilments outside of Him, we are worshipping other gods. We exalt them to the place of highest joy, and forget about God. As God said to Israel through Jeremiah:

Be astonished, O ye heavens, at this, and be horribly afraid, be ye very desolate, saith the LORD. For my people have committed two evils; they have forsaken me the fountain of living waters, and hewed them out cisterns, broken cisterns, that can hold no water.

Jeremiah 2:12-13

God is appalled because of the senselessness of idolatry – we are seeking joy, we want meaning – and we forsake the source of joy and meaning, and look for it in places that will never provide that. Idolatry is a travesty because it is a rejection of perfection, and a replacement with inferiority.

Idolatry is our first hurdle. Our Christian lives stagnate because God wants us single-mindedly in love with Him, not double-minded. He wants us hot, not lukewarm. He wants us to have no other gods before Him.

Idolatry is when your heart has not abandoned all its back-up plans, when it still has crutches to lean on 'in case God doesn't come through.' Idolatry is not a heart sold out to God.

2. Hurdle #2 – Unbelief

Unbelief might be also called belief of non-truths, for the fact of the matter is this: we all believe something, and we always behave according to what we believe. Your actions are simply the outworking of your beliefs. What you believe about where happiness is found, what you believe about how to pursue it, what you believe about life, what you believe really matters – these beliefs are acted out every moment of your life.

It does not matter what your lips say you believe – your heart's belief always betrays you by your actions. When we sin it is simply an act of unbelief in the Word of God. We do not believe the promises of God, we do not believe the consequences of sin are true, we do not believe in the reward of righteousness. Instead we believe something else – that sin rewards, we must fight for ourselves, that we can get along without God. Hebrews puts it in plain terms:

But without faith it is impossible to please Him: for he that cometh to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of them that diligently seek Him.

Hebrews 11:6

The Christian life will never take off so long as we deny God's pressing reality on our lives, and deny His pleasurable reward in our lives. Acting in sin, acting in rebellion, is an announcement that we believe God is not, and that sin is a rewarder of them that diligently seek it. Faith is the heartbeat of Christianity; unbelief is its death knoll.

3. Hurdle #3 – Pride

Pride is the inclination of fallen hearts to want their own way. Pride rebels against our place in the universe – creatures designed to reflect the glory of God. Pride wants to be a god, to have glory of our own, to be worshipped, to be self-sufficient, to be the centre of the universe. Pride is the force behind sin – it is the unsubmissive spirit that says, like Lucifer did in his fall, "I will." Not "Thy will be done" like Christ prayed, but "my will be done."

Pride regards itself as natural – it feels it ought to strike out for its own power, rights and privileges, at the expense of all others. Pride is self-love exalted above God-love. It is so welded to our sinful nature that its familiarity makes it feel right. We think it natural to place ourselves first, we feel it even right to prefer ourselves above others.

But a blind man boasting about things he cannot see has no credibility, nor does a proud human lecturing on morality. Our sin has corrupted us, and as long as we continue in a defence and protection of Self with a capital 'S', we cut ourselves off from spiritual growth. Because humility is the foundation for receiving grace, pride blocks our very means of living the Christian life – accessing God's grace. Pride, sitting on the throne of self, fighting off every challenge, works hard to retain its place.

4. Hurdle #4 – Laziness

Laziness is part of the rebellion of the heart. Laziness lusts after ease and comfort, and consistently seeks the easiest path of life at all times. Laziness shrinks back from any hardship or toil – it insists on doing everything

the easy way. It is a rebellion against the curse upon the ground – *“In the sweat of thy face shalt thou eat bread” (Genesis 3:19).*

Why should laziness be such a hurdle? Well, the Christian is called upon to love God wholeheartedly – implying diligence and effort. Yes, the Christian life is 100% God, but God gives grace proportional to the strain. Laziness rejects the very principle that God insists upon – passionate, earnest, fervent effort in seeking Him.

The deeper life requires that we resist the gravitational pull of ease and minimum effort, and push through with endurance, difficulty and sincere effort. The spiritual sluggard makes God’s glory seem like a thing hardly worth lifting a finger to pursue – therefore he will never receive the blessings of spiritual growth.

Those four sins – idolatry, unbelief, pride and laziness – combine to keep Christians from growing, and keep us in the same place year after year. So how do we throw off these weights which hold us down, and move into a consistently obedient Christian life?

Give your heart a better option

As we said, all humans seek happiness. The way to overcome the inclination of the heart in a wrong direction is to confront it with a better option. Humans do not pursue wrong options because they delight in being wrong, or honestly believe they are cheating themselves. Humans deceive themselves, and end up believing what they originally knew was not true. Humans suppress the truth God gives, till they call lies truth and truth lies.

Instead, we need to embrace the truth with our whole hearts. We need to see that idolatry is a lesser pleasure, we need to see that unbelief is blind to true reality, we need to see that pride denies itself the greatest blessings, and laziness forfeits reward instead of gaining it. To overcome these four, we need simply go back to the most fundamental command of the Christian life:

And Jesus answered him, “The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord: and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment.

Mark 12:29-30

Amazing how we miss this. Month after month, year after year, we run from pillar to post trying to find what the root of the Christian life is, where it begins and ends, what the ‘secret’ is to making it work, reading endless books claiming to have discovered it – when Christ’s words stand in black and white for all to read: the most important thing to a born-again believer, the ‘secret’ of the Christian life, is to love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength.

God is most glorified when humans regard God as the chief source of delight, happiness, comfort, sustenance and fulfilment. In other words, God is most glorified when Christians obey the first commandment – when they love Him more than anything else. That is why He calls it the most important: since God’s glory is the most important thing, the command that glorifies Him most is the priority.

It is sad that in Christian circles we feel embarrassed to speak of love as enjoyment or as satisfaction, seemingly thinking it noble to speak of love as something with no reward for us. We think love must be devoid of reward to the giver to be truly noble. But in fact, the Bible is unashamedly clear that there is great joy, blessing and satisfaction for the giver. It is more blessed to give than to receive. Not many people see the paradox in that verse.

God encourages unselfish giving – for the sake of blessedness. So the very act of giving is an act of profound receiving. If loving God meant doing something that brought me no joy, then it means the only one who benefits from me obeying that command is God. Somehow then, I the creature become a benefit to the Creator – I meet His needs, while mine are supposedly left unmet in my sacrificial act of love? No, this is not the love God is commanding!

The truth is, love for God is not like a love I give in His direction, hoping to somehow meet a supposed need (He has no need of my love, according to **Acts 17:25**). Rather, it is a love *of* God – a profound satisfaction, enjoyment and savouring of God. Loving God meets *my* needs, not His. When God is my highest pleasure, He is exalted as the most worthy of all things in this world. In other words – He then truly is my God, and I have no other gods before Him.

So how will obeying the first command overcome these four hurdles in my life? Well, consider how the command's love is qualified. We are to love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength.

- **All your heart**

The heart is the seat of the affections, the desires, the emotions. In other words, to love God this way means He is your chief joy, your greatest desire, your sweetest pleasure. This flattens the hurdle of idolatry.

To love God with all my heart means there are no competitors for my heart as far as joy, pleasure and fulfilment goes. Though I may enjoy God's gifts, I do not do so apart from God, or worse, in rebellion to God. My heart is fixed, as David said – fixed on Him. Loving this way means I vigorously set my heart upon Him to be the source of delight and joy:

If ye then be risen with Christ, seek those things which are above, where Christ sitteth on the right hand of God. Set your affection on things above, not on things on the earth.

Colossians 3:1-2

Idolatry is an affair of the heart. God calls idolaters adulterers because they are like an unfaithful spouse. They're like a wife who receives the provision, protection and the help of her husband, but when she wants pleasure, passion and enjoyment – she seeks it in the arms of other lovers.

This describes all too many of us. We use God for protection, provision, guidance and power. But when we want to be delighted and happy, we pursue other things – things He Himself made – but we pursue them outside of Him. Loving God with all your heart is a purifying of the heart – a uniting of all your affection to be centred and focused on God. Our emotions are to be totally given over to God.

- **All your soul**

Think of the soul as the decisional or volitional side of a person – their will. To love God with all your soul is to love Him in your decisions, to make pleasing Him your pleasure. Jesus said: *"If ye love me, keep my commandments"* (**John 14:15**). Every decision is done for the pleasure of pleasing. Loving God in my decisions flattens pride.

Pride is a refusal to submit; loving God in your decisions is a sweet humility. It surrenders self-will for a greater joy – submission to the Divine will. I strike out for self because I believe it will be in my best interest – but humility realises obeying the Shepherd is always the best thing I can do for myself. Loving God in this way pursues the sweetness of submission. Yes, obeying God pleases Him, but it profoundly pleases and benefits me, because obeying God is always the best thing one can do for oneself at any given time.

- **All your mind**

To love God with the mind means to make Him, essentially, your favourite thought. Whether it be in your plans, priorities, attitudes, assumptions, meditations, ambitions or goals – it is to have every thought coloured with the knowledge of God. The Word of God is to saturate our thinking so that our mind sees everything through ‘God-coloured lenses’. It means my thoughts are constantly viewing all things, from the mundane to the meaningful, as part of my fellowship with God.

A mystic of the seventeenth century put it this way: we are to practice the presence of God. We are to pursue a constant fellowship and abiding in Christ. This overcomes unbelief. Unbelief is denying the reality of God, and substituting your own version of reality.

Faith is treating the invisible as visible, and it is primarily a mental exercise (**Hebrews 11:6**). The more I make the thoughts of God and His things my pleasure to dwell on, the less inclined I am to neglect His Word and promises in everyday life.

- **All your strength**

To love God with all your strength means you spare no effort in your pursuit of this love. Disciplining your mind to dwell on Him continually takes considerable effort. Making the right choices is often hard and seems unnatural to the flesh. Sometimes setting your heart upon Him when it is cold takes effort. But God’s grace comes to the thirsty heart, to the hungry soul.

It is not that our effort is necessary to provide power – for it is all His power. It is not that diligence is necessary because the Christian life is so excruciatingly hard – though it is, in many respects – but as said, it is all God’s enabling grace anyway. No, diligence is necessary to provide evidence of deep desire – which is what glorifies God, and what He seeks.

Why should He bless a lazy, indifferent heart with Himself, when humans go to extraordinary lengths in the pursuit of fame, fortune, power or illicit pleasure? They work long hours, make incredible sacrifices and burn themselves out in the pursuit of what Solomon called vanity.

Does it glorify God then, when His children pursue Him casually, half-heartedly, and with a feeble, passing interest? Of course not. Thus, God commands us to love Him with all our strength – overcoming laziness in our lives.

Obedience of the first command will overcome the major obstacles to our growth. Loving God with all our heart overcomes idolatry. Loving God with all our soul overcomes pride. Loving God with all our mind overcomes unbelief, and loving God with all our strength overcomes laziness. But how do I do this?

How to love God with all your heart, soul and mind

1. Rely on Him

The greatest commandment requires the greatest grace. We might be enthusiastic about loving God – after all, it is a positive, enjoyable thing. But understand that you will not find it in yourself to love God the way we ought to. You will find your heart pursues other things naturally; it believes only what it sees; it loves ease and comfort; it will desire its own way till you die.

No, the natural soil of the human heart is hostile to the plant of God's grace. Salvation was necessary to enable us to live out the first commandment. The righteousness of the law, which is fulfilled by obeying the command to love God and love your neighbour, can only be fulfilled by receiving the righteousness of Christ in salvation. Then, with His life imparted to us by the Holy Spirit, we are able to love God as He did, and love others as He did. Thus, we need grace.

Romans 5:5 tells us that the Holy Spirit has shed love in our hearts. We need to ask God for the power to love Him as we ought. This might sound strange – but the foundation for loving God is that God loves God. He loves His glory, and thus loving Him is essentially Him loving Himself through you. That is not selfishness on God's part, for no one is more worthy of love than God, and if God loved anything more than Himself, He would be dishonest, and therefore not God.

2. Receive from Him

We need to make sure we are spending much time in His presence, receiving His love. We are not initiators of love with God. We do not give Him more love than He gives us. We are receivers and responders. We need to firstly be sure we are receiving love. Now, there is never a problem in the supply of love as far as God is concerned. There is just a problem with our receptivity. Poor 'reception' will result in poor response.

We love Him because He first loved us (**1 John 4:19**). This is the reason we need to sit at His feet, like Mary did. Jesus said she had chosen the thing that was needful. It is *necessary* to sit at Christ's feet daily and receive love, if you ever hope to obey the first commandment to love God.

3. Reflect on Him

The Lord's Supper was instituted to regularly remind us of the amazing sacrifice of Calvary. God clearly wanted us to think hard and often about the highest expression of His love – when He died for our sins. We need to spend much time reflecting on the cross – and the kind of love it represents: "*Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends*" (**John 15:13**).

We need to meditate that God's love for us could not be greater. **John 13:1** tells us that Jesus loved His own to the uttermost: "*having loved His own which were in the world, He loved them unto the end*" – and this is still the case. Indeed, we will respond in love when we understand how loved we are.

4. Recognise Him

We need to see how lovely He is. He is '*altogether lovely*,' as **Song of Solomon 5:16** puts it. He is the most worthy of love, and is supremely lovely in that He is the most beautiful of all, in all things. We do not have to pretend it is so, we just have to open our blind eyes, take the veils off our hard hearts, and recognise it to be so. This means much time spent in the Word, growing in appreciation for Who He is – the fairest of ten thousand.

Pride, idolatry, unbelief and laziness are the reactions of cold hearts living for self. The answer is to see that God does a far better job of loving us than we do for ourselves. The wise thing to do then is to appropriate the grace God has given to enable loving Him.

Make the first commandment your first concern. If you love Him with your heart, soul, mind and strength, you will flatten these hurdles, and push through to a deeper, God-glorifying Christian life. Rely on Him to help you to love Him. Spend much time this year in His presence, receiving love from Him. Likewise, spend time reflecting on the cross. Grow in the knowledge of Him – that you might see how lovely He is. And then, may you respond by loving Him on your emotions, your decisions, your thoughts, and your efforts.