

--- Listen for obstacles that keep us from growing in faith, hope and love.

Oftentimes, there are obstacles that get in the way of accomplishing something. Some are natural, as in I will never be a star Quarterback or Opera singer. But many times, we create obstacles that bind us including: fear, anger, mistrust, misunderstanding, lack of self-worth, etc. They can hold us back and imprison us in our mind.

One example is the natural fear of heights. I say natural, because basically it is the body's warning mechanism for danger. In most people, as they get close to cliff, their bodies will stiffen and send them the signal, "Danger, Danger – watch out!" That allows us to detect a situation that could cause us harm. It's self-defense.

However, sometimes, the fear of heights becomes unreasonable. In our brain we can understand that driving over a bridge or flying in an airplane or climbing up a latter can be safe with proper precautions. However, the fear of heights can still try to hold us back even those our brain says it is relatively safe.

During Chaplain Training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, we were asked to repel down a 40-foot tower. I looked up at that tower and said, "You want me to do what???" Immediately my heart started beating faster as we walked toward the trainers, who started to prepare us. They showed us how to tie the proper safety harness and instructed us on the techniques involved in what we were going to do. Then we broke into groups and started to climb the ladder up the tower, carefully keeping three points of contact. As I arrived at the platform, my heart again let me know we were high above the ground. We lined up and one by one buckled into the repelling line and called down to the belay – the person holding the rope below. Then the scary part: To hang over the edge and lean your butt so that you fall over the edge until the harness takes your weight. At that point, I was breathing heavy, my heart was pounding and I was struggling. As the rest of the chaplains saw this, they started encouraging me, "You can do, it Pat! Go Pat! You can do it!" The instructors helped me ease over the side and take a leap of faith – the rope harness took my weight and I began to walk down the side, eventually getting the courage to push off and repel a little at a time. IT WAS AWESOME!

It was awesome that I overcame my fear and the feeling of repelling was exhilarating. So much so... that I asked to it again!!

That was one example of how I could have let an obstacle, fear, imprisonment me and keep me from being able to doing something big.

There are many other obstacles that can enslave us and take away our freedom:

- We can be slave to our possessions, where we HAVE TO use the new car, new golf clubs, new jetski, wear the new dress. And we will inconvenience ourselves to get our money's worth. I remember riding my motorcycle to work in 95 degrees one summer because I felt I had to use it. Not smart.
- We can be "slaves to the grind" – where we have too many things to do, but don't actually get to do the important things.
- Also, anger, fear, mistrust, depression, lack of self worth
- Caught is a pattern of sin
- Slave to unhealthy habits, like eating when stressed or other destructive behaviors when stressed
- There can be mental obstacles that like grudges and past hurts and unforgiveness that get in the way of loving our spouse, kids, neighbors
- Addictions can trap us and hurt family, friends and help us lose jobs, license, our lives as we have seen with the opioid crisis
- Racism and other discrimination can cause us to treat others with disrespect or negligence instead of loving them.
- Or even just the idea that "I can't" can enslave us. "I can't get the help I need. I can't forgive that person who hurt me. I can't get a needed surgery."
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In the readings we hear of things that burden us: *the corruptible body burdens the soul, many concerns weigh down the mind* (Wis 9). There are things that can keep us from being a disciple of the Lord. But Jesus wants to set us free from obstacles that trap us.

- Change habits and build healthy ones, like a Healthy diet or getting sleep
- Say no to too much

- Fast from things that get in the way, like too much screen time – make room for good stuff. Like prayer
- Perhaps seek counseling or AA, NA support groups
- Talk to a friend/mentor
- Realize we are not in this alone --- everyone struggles. Even though we put on a façade that everything is ok. Most people are struggling with something.

We have the example of St. Paul, pleading for a fellow disciple, Onesimus, a slave. Paul pleads with another Christian, Philemon, to set Onesimus free. That is a very charitable thing to do.

But check this out: St. Paul is doing this work of charity, but where is he? He is in prison! Possibly in Rome. But he does not let his physical chains keep him from loving Jesus or loving his neighbor. He sees an injustice and tries to remedy it. In this case, Paul writes a letter to try to convince Philemon to give freedom to Onesimus, but also to free Philemon's mind – so that Philemon will no longer see Onesimus as a slave, but as a brother. It would free Philemon to love better. Paul may have been shackled and jailed, but he was free to serve Christ.

If you want another example of someone not letting imprisonment keep them from seeking justice and freedom, read "Letter from Birmingham Jail" by Martin Luther King, Jr. King writes to end segregation while he himself is imprisoned for nonviolent protest.

Can we make more room for Jesus? Can we overcome our obstacles and be more free to love and seek justice for our neighbor? We can if we look for concrete small changes to work on this week.

Let us pray for the courage to take up our cross and follow Christ and seek help and help each other to conquer any obstacles that get in the way of our freedom to love as Christ loves us: and to "seek justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God."