

Common Grace: Its Power and Limits

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Date: 06 July 2025

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[0 : 00] This morning, we began a short series that considers the theological concept of common grace.

! And I acknowledge this morning, and I'll acknowledge it again, it might be old news for some of you. You might be well aware of what that means. But for others, it might bring fresh understanding. The concept of common grace is not a product of human creativity or an imposition on the biblical text. It is the distillation of an important theme that runs throughout the Bible story.

From Adam and Eve being told to be fruitful and multiply and exercise dominion over what God had made, what's usually referred to as the cultural mandate, to the closing language of revelation that speaks of the heavenly city, the gates of which will never be shut by day. They will bring into it the glory and honor of the nations. The Bible reveals God's hand in creating and sustaining all that He has made, and the potential resident in what He has made to bring blessing to all and glory to Him. Now, this doesn't mean that everything, everything that transpires in the creation brings Him glory. But as designed and created, it was intended to do so, and can still do so.

For as Paul says, for of Him and through Him and to Him are all things. Now, this morning, we used the newly built Govan-Partic footbridge to illustrate this.

[1 : 38] We had some slides showing the different, from different angles of what had gone into making that bridge. You see, people conceived of having a bridge built that would connect those two neighborhoods, Partic and Govan. So a design was made, a bridge was built, and some one million treks and 200,000 bicycle rides had passed over that bridge since it opened September of last year.

And we considered that it's likely that less than 1% of the people who saw the need, conceived of a solution to the need, executed that solution, purposed each day to live according to the revealed will of God, or sought through their participation in building the bridge to bring glory to God.

Nonetheless, the bridge came to be, and it has brought benefit. And that is due to God's grace.

God's grace being extended to and experienced by all, even those who do not know or honor Him.

And we want to draw a distinction between what we're calling common grace and particular grace.

Abraham Kuyper, Dutch theologian, late 19th, early 20th century, we read this this morning.

He asserts that John Calvin, that important figure from the 16th century Reformation, put forward, quote, the great principle that there is a particular grace which works salvation, and also a common grace by which God maintains the life of the world, relaxes the curse upon it, and arrests its process of corruption, and allows the free development of our life in which to glorify Himself as Creator.

[3 : 22] So this evening, I want us to consider how common grace empowers human flourishing, but it has its limits.

It cannot save or renew the heart. I think we'll be helped by seeing the presence of common grace in a setting that keeps us from assuming too much about common grace, and yet appreciates that God bestows the gifts of common grace, irrespective of the worthiness of the recipients.

And that's in Genesis chapter 4. Now in Genesis 4, 17 through 22, we have the genealogy of the descendants from Cain. Cain, of course, is the firstborn son of Adam and Eve.

He was conceived after they had been sent out of the garden. And when he was born, it seems likely that Eve saw him as the one promised who would turn back the evil that had been let loose by her in Adam's rebellion.

Alas, this was not to be. Cain ended up murdering his younger brother. And as a result, God cursed Cain. Because he had stained the ground with his brother's blood, God said that the ground would, quote, no longer yield to you its strength.

[4 : 36] And he would be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth. But Cain pleaded with the Lord. Cain said to the Lord, my punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, you have driven me today away from the ground.

And from your face I shall be hidden. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth. And whoever finds me will kill me. And the Lord said to him, not so. If anyone kills Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold.

And the Lord put a mark on Cain, lest anyone found him should attack him. Now that is a stroke of God's grace of visiting wicked Cain. But what does Cain do?

Well, his wife conceives and bears a son, whom he calls Enoch. And true to Cain's rebellious nature, Cain builds a city. The one who was cursed by God to wander the earth.

And in the grace of God was told that he would be avenged should anybody kill him. He builds a city. Who says I need to wander? Why should I have to worry about being vulnerable to anybody who would desire to kill me?

[5 : 39] I'll build myself a city in which to live safely. And not only will I have a city, I'll name it after my firstborn so everyone will know who gets to say whether or not my line will continue.

That's pretty cheeky, don't you think? Well, there must be something in the family tree that's carried down from one generation to the next. Five generations after Cain comes Lameck, a real charmer. He's a lovely guy. First off, we learn that he took two wives, Ada and Zillah. That's the first incident of polygamy recorded in the Bible, the introduction of which proves to be disastrous throughout the Old Testament.

By his two wives, Lameck has four children, three sons and a daughter. In verse 23 to 24, we get a glimpse of the depravity of this guy through a boast that he makes, one in which he is well aware of the lineage from which he comes.

Lameck said to his wives, Ada and Zillah, hear my voice, you wives of Lameck. Listen to what I say. I've killed a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me. That word for young man is really child.

[6 : 49] If Cain's revenge is sevenfold, then Lameck's is 77fold. Derek Kidner, Old Testament scholar, says, Lameck's taunting song reveals the swift progress of sin.

Where Cain had succumbed to it, Lameck exults in it. Where Cain had sought protection, Lameck looks around for provocation. The savage disproportion of killing a mere lad for a mere wound is the whole point of his boast.

Lameck is a wicked, wicked man. But look at this. In verses 20 to 22, Ada bore Jubal. He was the father of those who dwell in tents and have livestock.

His brother's name was Jubal. He was the father of all those who play lyre and pipe. Zillah was also bore Tubal Cain. He was the forger of all instruments of bronze and iron. So in the middle of the record of rebellion towards God, sexual immorality, murderous, boastful violence, we're told of people who introduce to the world skills that promote human flourishing.

Animal husbandry, music, the arts, tools, technology. Again, Derek Kidner. Cain's family is a microcosm.

[8 : 05] Its pattern of technical prowess and moral failure is that of humanity. As I said, this account from Genesis 4 keeps us from assuming too much about common grace and yet demonstrates that God bestows the gifts of common grace irrespective of the worthiness of the recipients.

Now, we talked about the idea that common grace promotes human flourishing. Because John Calvin is viewed as the father of the doctrine of common grace, let's use the date in which his final version of his magnum opus, Institutes of the Christian Religion, which was published in 1559, as a baseline to which compare the extent to which common grace has caused human flourishing.

Life expectancy. In Scotland in 1559, life expectancy was probably around 30 to 40 years. And that was due to factors such as high infant mortality, disease, limited access to health care.

Today, life expectancy has essentially doubled. Literacy rates. In 1559, literacy rates in Scotland were low, particularly among women, it's reported.

Some historians estimate that around 20% of men were literate. Female literacy was possibly as low as 10%. Now in Scotland, literacy rates are generally high, with around 73.3% of the working age population having literacy skills considered appropriate for modern society.

[9 : 36] And even the other quarter may experience challenges, but they know enough to generally manage daily life. School-age children record high levels of literacy. Primary pupils and 83%,

excuse me, 83.3% of secondary pupils meeting expectations in 23 to 24.

How about the water supply? In 1559, our fellows Glaswegians were drinking from the River Clyde. That was a major source of water for various purposes, including drinking, washing, sanitation. Glasgow had a number of public wells that drew water from the river or local springs. But there was no network of pipes or treatment facilities in 1559. Therefore, people would have to collect water from these sources themselves, carrying it back to their homes.

Now, the lack of proper water supply system also meant that sanitation was a challenge. So outbreaks of waterborne diseases were more common. For instance, in the early 19th century, cholera was common in Glasgow because there was no piped water supply.

A cholera epidemic from 1849, so, excuse me, 1848 to 1849 killed 4,000 people in Glasgow. Now, Loch Katrine, Katrin, yeah, I know we put the emphasis on the right syllable.

[10:53] Now, Loch Katrine. It's a freshwater loch, right? Up in the Stirling District. It's the main source of water for the city of Glasgow. The construction of that 34-mile-long aqueduct linking the loch to the city began in 1855 and opened by Queen Victoria in 1859.

And what about travel? In 1559, travel between Glasgow and London would have taken between two to three weeks by horse or carriage. Now it takes about four and a half hours by train.

See, there are numerous ways in which we can be grateful for how, what Calvin says in the words, that he unleashed the potencies of common grace.

See, the historic situation that Calvin stepped into when he developed this doctrine had a profoundly transforming effect on the practices of the church and its relationship to the world, and ultimately to the world itself.

You see, during the Middle Ages, the hierarchy of the church gave rise to traditions in which, the church and the world were placed over against each other. The one being sanctified and the other one still being under the curse.

[11:59] Everything outside the church was under the influence of demons. Hence, in a Christian country, the entire social life was to be covered by the wings of the church.

The goal was that all endeavors of life were to be brought under ecclesiastical guardianship, whether it was the magistrate or the guilds, the artist or the family. As Kuyper observes, this was a gigantic effort to claim the entire world for Christ.

But, there was a price to be paid for that ambitious undertaking. Of necessity, it brought with it the severest judgment on every life tendency, which either as heretical or demons withdrew itself from the blessing of the church.

And this deadening theory was carried out with iron logic, Kuyper says. Not necessarily for malevolent reasons, but for the lofty purpose of saving the Christianized world, i.e.

the world as overshadowed by the church. However, he says, dominion over the world, through, by, by its dominion over the world, the church proves an obstacle to every free development of its life.

[13:04] And against this, right, Kuyper says, Calvin put forward that great principle that there is a particular grace that works salvation, also a common grace by which God, maintaining the life of the world, relaxes its curse, arrests the process of corruption, and allows free development of our life in which to glorify himself as creator.

See, under Calvinism, the church withdrew itself from the control of society and receded to be neither more nor less in the congregation of believers. And in every department of life, the world was not emancipated from God, but from the dominion of the church.

And as a consequence, the potencies of God's common grace could be realized in the world.

Indeed, Kuyper maintains, it's the church's ongoing duty to, quote, recognize that the life of the world is to be honored in its independence, and that we must, in every domain, discover the treasures and develop the potencies hidden by God in nature and in human life.

Now, for me, I shared some of this this morning. For me, personally, coming to an understanding of this doctrine resulted in my once again being able to engage the world. And that in a meaningful, God-glorifying way.

Why was that? Because I was discipled in a sense that, indeed, everything outside the church is just wicked. It has no merit. Only that which is done for Christ is the only thing that has any merit to it.

[14:28] And so, that was a really strong emphasis on my discipleship. So to the point of where, as I said this morning, Barb and I suddenly left behind all of our friends and the activities that we liked

because, well, those are just of the world.

But discovering this doctrine of common grace, seeing it in the scripture, again, I was able to engage the world once again. And, you know, the, see, I could, I could now seek the peace of the city, as Jeremiah says, and the welfare of my neighbors.

Not as a stepping stone for a testimony, but because God cares that love be expressed to people simply because it's the right thing to do, the just thing to do. This morning, we considered how out of love, God causes the rain to fall and the sun to shine on the evil and the good.

Furthermore, I could appreciate the creative and extraordinary power of God expressed through the accomplishments of his creatures. As the hymn goes, we'll be singing this later, he shines in all that's fair.

However, now this included not only the rustling grass spoken of in the hymn, but the sculpture, the skyscraper, the symphony, a well-ordered election resulting in a peaceful transition of power, the caring nurse, the diligent doctor.

[15 : 45] But to be sure, the world becomes a little less hostile. In truth, I marvel, I marvel at the potencies of God's common grace, and what they produced in a place from which I come, New York City.

It's a testament to God's common grace. Common grace is exhibited in its museums, institutions of higher learning, orchestras, architecture, infrastructure of water, sanitation, power, and transportation.

In addition, there's the fact that there's 8 million plus people living in a relatively confined space, and they don't kill each other. See, the encouraging and restraining power of God's common grace is daily on display.

And yet, it's so very much the norm that Christians from outside of a place like New York City view it as nothing more than a place to be avoided, if not plowed over. Now, such a change in attitude as I had towards the world is not without concerns, however.

It's important to keep before us the reality that no amount of human power or prowess exhibited as a result of God's common grace can redeem a soul.

[16 : 54] Now, if we look at our passage from Romans 1, what does Paul write? God's invisible attributes, namely His eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived ever since the creation of the world in the things that have been made.

So behind all the potential of common grace is the God who put the potential there when He created everything. And Paul goes so far as to say that what can be known about God is plain to people because God has shown it to them in the things that He has made.

So he says they're without excuse. But rather than honoring God and giving thanks to Him, they suppress the truth about God, they exchange the truth about God for a lie and worship and serve the creature rather than creator who is blessed forever.

But, common grace, common grace abilities in human beings do not have a regenerative, salvific effect, certainly not for the soul and not for society.

A person isn't saved by good works that he does that she does. People are saved by grace through faith, and this isn't of their own doing. It is the gift of God, not the result of works.

[18 : 05] In addition, no matter how determined the effort and diligently, the application of the abilities resident within human beings, it will not create heaven on earth. We cannot afford this triumphalist mindset that you often see, right, to take hold because we assume that the doctrine of common grace affirms its potencies, that somehow it will create heaven on earth.

True conversion of a culture would only seem to be the result of an extraordinary act of God's sovereign power in what are often called awakenings or revivals. And nor can we be so seduced by our appreciation and care for people in the here and now, that we lose sight of the fact that everyone, no matter how intelligent, how creative, or indeed, how in need of our love and care, will be brought to the day.

All of them will be brought to the day on which Paul says, God will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and therefore he commands all people everywhere to repent. See, common grace is just that, common. It's common both in its quantity and its quality. All creatures partake of it, and though important and powerful, it's ordinary compared to the glory of particular grace.

So a distinction must be maintained between the human's ability to do things that are morally good and their inability to do any saving good. And when that distinction is lost, and the potencies and or the needs of human beings are exalted, theology descends into a human-centered social gospel. [19 : 39] The good works become an end to themselves, done for humanity solely, for humanity's betterment, and not for the glory of God. Additionally, it's important to acknowledge that an emphasis on common grace and its helpfulness in aiding our understanding of how we can engage our fellow human beings has the potential of blurring the lines.

We must guard against relationships that are grounded in common grace, supplanting relationships founded in special grace. The apostle reminds us that as we have opportunity, let us do good to everyone, especially those who are of the household of faith.

See, the warning of the apostle John, it still stands. The force, the force which wars against the person, purposes of God, are no less prevalent and formidable.

He says to beware of the world. The seductive power of the world, admittedly constrained by common grace, is something which we are strongly warned against scripture.

It would be the height of foolishness to turn a deaf ear to those warnings. Sober-minded vigilance is called for, and while we should engage with our fellow yet unregenerate neighbors and seek for their common good, we must do so, quote, with the clear awareness that in the public square, we are surrounded by people who call good evil and evil good, who put darkness for light and light for darkness, who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter.

[21 : 09] So we maintain this distinction between particular grace and common grace. But what I'm arguing is that too often within the church, all we talk about is particular grace.

All we work towards is particular grace. When in fact, God has given us the opportunity to engage with our neighbors because we share so much in common. Because we're all image bearers of God.

Because we benefit from the gifts that people who don't know God, who probably hate God, but they build bridges so one neighborhood can get to the next neighborhood. And they might do it because they get a fat paycheck, but God wanted the bridge built.

And so we had it built, even by all those reprobates. And so we must be mindful that we have much more in common with people than we do not.

We have much more in common with people outside the church than we do not. That's because we are all living in the same place. And we're all image bearers of God. And we can understand that people, God can use those people, the potencies that He's put within them, as well as in creation, to make things happen.

[22 : 21] That's what was supposed to happen at the very beginning. That's what Adam and Eve were given to do. He said, here, I've created this thing. There is so much stuff in here. And I want you to do it. I want you to take dominion. I want you to make it happen.

Remember how it was kind of without order and so on. He begins to order things, and then he places them there and says, no, I want you to cultivate. I want you to be fruitful and multiply, not just babies, but I want you to take all that's in there and make it happen.

It'll be a blessing for you, a blessing for those around us, and it'll give glory to me. Sin comes in. Sin comes in. Man, so much of what human beings do. But that demand, that mandate is still there, and the power and potential is still there.

You know, the famous parable of the Good Samaritan. We know that parable, how it is that a lawyer stands up to test Jesus. He says, teacher, what shall we do to inherit eternal life?

And he says, what's written in the law? How do you read it? He answers, you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, with all your mind, and your neighbor as yourself. Jesus said to him, you've answered correctly.

[23 : 27] Do this, and you will live. But he, the lawyer, desiring to justify himself, to declare himself righteous, to put himself in a place where he's free, says to Jesus, who is my neighbor?

And Jesus replied with that parable. And you know the details of it, right? One man is beat up, left for dead on the side of the road. Along comes a priest and a Levite, and they walk by on the other side of the road for whatever reason.

We don't need to detail that. But what happens is that a Samaritan comes along. And a Samaritan had no dealings with the Jews. The Samaritans and Jews hated each other. But along comes a Samaritan, and he sees the man beaten up, left for dead on the side of the road.

And what's the response? He has compassion. He gets it. He knows what it would be like to be beat up on the side of the road. He knows what he would like someone to do for him, if that was him.

And so he crosses all that historical garbage. He crosses all that ethnic garbage. He crosses all that religious garbage to go help a fellow human being. It's common grace.

[24 : 32] That's common grace moving a heart to do something that needs to be done, that ought to be done. And he goes to the max, right? He binds up his wounds, pours on oil and wine, sets him on his own animal, brings him to an inn, took care of him for the evening.

The next day, he took out two denarii, gave it to the innkeeper, said, take care of him. Whatever more you spend, I'll repay you when I come back. I mean, he took it seriously. Now, he wouldn't have called it common grace, but it's a wonderful demonstration of how it is that we can see in each other, among the people that we live, that we're all human beings and we're all struggling.

And God gives us opportunities to indeed step across some of those barriers to begin to exhibit the potentials that God has put within us and within creation.

A good Samaritan is so called because he is good. He's good. So the Lord portrays a man who responds with compassion and practices the kind of love that the Lord desires his hearers to practice.

And in this, the good Samaritan stands as an example of one who fulfills the law to love your neighbor as yourself. So it's clear, right? It's clear from our Lord's teaching that we are to be a neighbor to the one who is in need.

[25 : 50] And this isn't just to be qualified by any consideration as to whether it relates to his salvation. I mean, there's nothing in the story that says they even talk to each other. And he's going to come back and the guy could be gone.

He says, that's all right. I'll pay the bill. Plus, he's a Samaritan. He's a Jew. What are they going to share? He's a human being and he acts in common grace. And he's acting like his heavenly father because as Jesus teaches elsewhere in the Gospel of Luke, if you love those who love you, what benefits that to you?

For even sinners love those who love them. But love your enemies and do good and lend expecting nothing in return and your reward will be great. And you will be sons of the Most High for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.

Be merciful even as your Father in Heaven is merciful. So, the title of the sermon was Common Grace, Its Power and Its Limits.

So there's a lot of power available to bring glory to God through all that he has put within his creation and frankly, with which he's put in human beings. And it can be expressed in creating something like a bridge, but it can be expressed also just being merciful and kind in having compassion.

[27 : 04] Again, there is a distinction. Its limits are that it doesn't save anybody. But like we saw this morning, that same bridge that linked those two neighborhoods can stand as a metaphor for common grace for us.

That is that in common grace, we can cause people to kind of cross that spiritual divide. Right? The Christian, the non-Christian. Common grace allows us, gives us a kind of bridge by which we can make connection with people and encourage them to come to where we are.

God is so good. He's so merciful. He cares for all that he has made. He is good to all, as we read. And so, he's good to us.

We are recipients of that particular grace, but he wants us now with his help, his energy, his power, his presence of his spirit to go out and do good to his glory.

Let's pray. Lord God, we thank you for how it is that we benefit so much from what we're calling common grace. That despite the fallenness of the world, as we saw demonstrated there in Genesis 4, just how ugly human beings can be, and yet in the middle of that, in the middle of that, you place people that have capacity to cause human flourishing.

[28 : 24] And so, Lord, that's, we sense that. We understand it, Lord. We experience it. We experience it when we go to that unsaved doctor. We experience it when we go to that unsaved mechanic.

We experience it when we just are given something just as a kindness from someone who doesn't know you. Lord, you are good.

You are good. And we want to reflect that goodness, Lord. And we help us, Lord, indeed, to maintain the reality that we know. We know that there is a day in which no matter how good somebody is, no matter how much intellect and power and capability they have, they will still have to give an answer for their lack of righteousness before you.

But, Lord, help us to build that bridge. Help us to make those relationships as we share with our neighbors, with our friends, with our loved ones who don't know you, the common grace that we have because of what you have done out of your love for your glory.

In Christ's name, amen.