

Common Grace: Making Connections

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[0 : 00] So last Sunday, I began a short series dealing with the theological concept of common grace. Common grace is a grace from God that's distinguished from another grace from God called particular or saving grace.

! And it's distinguished because it is a grace that doesn't regenerate people. It doesn't save them. See, without the regenerating work of particular grace, people remain dead in their trespasses and sins.

And also, common grace is distinguished from saving grace because though common grace provides much benefit and many blessings to those who experience it, and even prompts people to do works that reflect God's will, whether they acknowledge it or not, we are taught that no matter how many good works a person does, it does not save them.

For we're saved by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. So, why should we even call when I'm talking about grace? Well, because grace, by definition, is unmerited favor.

That is, that you didn't earn it, it's a gift. Unmerited favor. And for sinful, rebellious humanity, to still profit from God, sending the rain to fall and the sun to shine on the good and the evil, the just and the unjust, as Jesus teaches, that's an act of unmerited favor.

[1 : 29] And hence, grace. So, I've offered that we can trace in Scripture these two forms of grace. Saving grace, which results in faith in Christ, the forgiveness of sins, the hope of eternal life.

And common grace, in which God sustains His creation, restrains sin, endows all that He has made with amazing capacities, including human beings.

And those human beings were tasked with bringing out those capacities resident within creation for the blessing of all and for the glory of God. Now, why is it important for us to recognize the reality, the presence of common grace?

I'll say three things. One, we want to be grateful. We want to be grateful to God for the many benefits that common grace provides to us and to our neighbors. Secondly, we want to take advantage of it.

Take advantage of it and appreciate the presence of common grace without thinking that we're being worldly by doing so. And we want to understand how common grace provides a bridge for us to connect with the non-Christians in our lives.

[2 : 39] And to that last point, this morning, I'd like us to consider what Abraham Kuyper, a Dutch theologian from the late 19th, early 20th century, calls the interior operations.

The interior operations of common grace. Now, we've alluded to this already in some of the things we've already said. But what we mostly concentrated on are what Kuyper calls the exterior workings of common grace.

For example, in our very first message, we considered the Govan-Partic footbridge that was built. Right? The capacities, the capacities that God has built into creation were harnessed and applied to the need to connect one neighborhood to another that were separated by the River Clyde.

And to get from one to the other took some significant effort. But now, because of the exterior operations of common grace, people can move freely.

And by the grace of God, it was done well and it is being well used. And I said, on that first one point, I mean, do we think that everybody who saw the need, conceived the design, executed the design, and now walk across back and forth, give glory to God for doing that?

[3 : 48] And now, no, I doubt that there was less than 1% Christians involved in that process. However, nonetheless, it brings benefit. And it is done, it has met a need and done it well.

That's an evidence of the exterior working of common grace. And that same kind of exterior workings could be applied to advances in medical science, products we associate with creativity, such as music and the art, and all kinds of other things that go on in the world.

But Kuyper argues for an interior operation of common grace. He sees it as, quote, operative, wherever civic virtue, a sense of domesticity, natural love, the practice of human virtue, the improvement of the public conscience, integrity, mutual loyalty among people, and a feeling for piety, leaven life.

These, he says, are interior operations of common grace. So the question is, are there ways in which we see common grace at work, not just in what people do with their hands, but also what goes on in their souls?

I want you to imagine something. You're watching a television show. And a character in the drama does an act that expresses compassion for another person, and it moves you.

[5 : 14] That is that you've been drawn into the plot. You've identified with the characters. The story has been well told. Maybe even without you knowing it, you care about what happens to that particular character.

And at one moment, in one moment in the story, someone does something kind for that person, and you're moved by it. You maybe even tear up when it happens.

Or it makes you smile because you're happy for the character. Where does your response come from? Well, I'm going to say that you respond that way because you get it. You can identify with the emotional and life situation of the character, and you respond as you ought to respond.

What if it's a different plot? A character has been dealt a severe injustice, wrongly accused, and is facing consequences that he or she should not have to be facing. And the story involves the unraveling of the conspiracy.

And in the end, the person who actually did the wrong is found out and receives a just reward. And you care that it turns out that way. Why do you care? I'm going to say it's because you get it.

[6 : 22] Justice is important. And when an injustice goes unpunished, we know something is not as it should be. So in the first case, you empathize with the character and long for that character to receive the kind of love and care the person needs.

In the second, you are grateful when the wrongdoer is found out and punished. Why? Why do we respond in ways that we could characterize as godly? Well, it could be.

Because we've been given new life in Christ. A new heart. And once we were hard-hearted. We could care less what happens to people. Or in the case of the wrongdoer, you say, Hey, if you can get away with it, good for you.

But having been made a Christian, it might account for your response. But what it doesn't account for is the person who wrote the script, the person who directed the scene, or the actor who portrayed the character well enough that you cared about what was happening to them.

Did you think that everyone who effectively, through their writing, directing, and acting the scene, caused you to respond as you did, were born again? I believe we can confidently say no.

[7 : 33] So where did that ability, or more to the point, that morality come from? Now, it's been defended in a number of books recently, and even acknowledged by the atheist Richard Dawkins, that living in a society that has been shaped by the values of Christianity is a much more desirable place to live.

It's just possible, then, that the people involved in producing such shows have been shaped and molded by Christian values due to their interior operations of common grace.

Common grace is what gives rise to their ability to create scenarios that cause us to respond in the way that we do. Now, the societal context in which Jesus arrived, and in which the gospel was first being proclaimed, was a very different society with a very different set of values than what Christ called for in his teaching and his life.

Roman society was cruel. Now, there was such a thing as called the Pax Romana, the political stability generated by Rome that governed a large swath of the world, but that peace was accomplished through coercion, not persuasion.

The relative peace that existed among different nationalities was not due to mutual respect, but violent subjugation. And even the magnificent structures that still stand were built by slaves, not free people working for a living wage.

[8 : 58] And then, as one observer notes, generosity toward the poor out of compassion for them in their state, was not considered a virtuous act. Well, let me ask you this. Do you think God is more pleased with a society that reflects Roman values or a society that reflects Christ's teachings?

Or to put it in human terms, do you think God would root for the wrongdoer or the victim in our TV show? Do you think he would have been pleased by the kindness of the one character extended to the other character?

Do you think he would be pleased with the response that it generated in you and other people watching the show? Or to put it another way, do you think God cares how people act even if they are not Christians?

Do you think he's pleased when someone, anyone, does something good and is displeased with someone, anyone, who does something wrong? Or do you think he's totally disinterested in such things, only cares about the behavior of those who are the object of his particular grace?

Well, let's turn to Titus and see if we can find a couple of answers. Now, Titus is a short, it's called a pastoral epistle.

[10 : 17] Paul left Titus in Crete, quote, so that you might put what remained in order. So he talks to him about elders to deal with unscrupulous teachers. And then in chapter 2, verse 1, he says, but as for you, he's talking to Titus, as for you, teach what accords with sound doctrine.

And he goes on to talk how various people ought to be with one another in the church. And Titus' own behavior is important. Show yourself in all respects to be a model of good works.

And in your teaching, show integrity, dignity, and sound speech that cannot be condemned so that an opponent may be put to shame, having nothing evil to say about us. And he speaks of behavior that adorns the doctrine of God our Savior.

And then he goes on in 2, starting in verse 11, where he talks about the grace of God, the particular grace that we all welcome and are so grateful for.

For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people, training us to renounce ungodliness, worldly passions, to live self-controlled, upright, godly lives in this present age. Waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Jesus Christ, who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and purify for himself a people for his own possession, who are zealous for good work.

[11 : 30] Can we have it? Amen. Amen. Amen. Thank you. Thank you. The good works that God is expecting do not just concern their own spiritual sanctification in the church, but also those among whom they live.

He goes on to say, remind them, that is the people in the church, to be submissive to rulers and authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good work, to speak evil of no one, to avoid quarreling, be gentle, to show perfect courtesy towards all people.

And then in verse 3, there's a characterization of how fallen humanity tends to behave and how they, apart from God's regenerating grace, behave. That is those people in the church. For we ourselves, he said, were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and other pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.

See, if God redeemed us in order that we might behave differently, then we could say with confidence that there is behavior that God is pleased with and behavior that he is not pleased with.

And he goes on to talk about the particular grace when the goodness of our loving kindness of God appeared and saved our Savior. Not because of works that we've done righteous, but according to his mercy by the washing and regeneration of the rule of the Holy Spirit whom he poured out on us richly through Jesus Christ, our Savior, so that being justified by his grace, we might become heirs according to the hope of eternal life.

[12 : 59] And I have an amen. Thank you. Now, verse 8. The saying is trustworthy, and I want you to insist on these things, Titus, so that those who have believed in God may be careful to devote themselves to good works.

These things are excellent and profitable for whom? For people. Not for them. It is for them. But not just them. Not just for those in the church, but for people.

And indeed, the underlying Greek there is indeed, means people outside of the church. That's clearly what he means in the context. So God expects those he has saved to live lives that adorn the gospel by doing good works, works that are profitable for people, for the Christian and the non-Christian.

Now, if that's his intent in saving people, do you think God is pleased when that behavior influences unsaved people to behave in a similar way? That is, is God pleased when the presence of Christianity has so influenced society that people, when watching a movie, are brought to tears or joy because the story reflects consciously or unconsciously the values of the kingdom of God?

I don't think that's a hard thing to figure out. I mean, if we go back what we considered earlier, that God causes the rain to fall, the sun to shine on the good and the evil, the just and the unjust, and we learn that truth from Jesus who offers that truth as a rationale for why we should love our enemies.

[14 : 27] That is, that we are to love that way because we are to be like our Father in heaven who treats his enemies in that manner. Now, can we not assume that God is pleased when his own character is reflected in the behavior of those who bear his image even if they don't confess his name?

And, as we read this morning, providentially, we consider the good Samaritan who was put forward as an example not because he worshipped the God of the Jews but because he acted as people are supposed to act.

Then it's not a huge leap to suggest that God cares about compassion, kindness, justice, goodness, whenever, wherever, and by whomever it is expressed.

Now, I want to be careful to remind us that we're talking about common grace here, not saving or particular grace. We're taught that good works do not save a person, but we do not need to discount good works as being anything less than good in a common grace sort of way.

Let me read this one article from the Canons of Dort. Canons of Dort are a reformed confession generated in 1619.

[15 : 40] It talks about the reality of what's happened with the fall. Therefore, all men are conceived in sin and by nature children of wrath incapable of saving good, prone to evil, dead in sin, and in a bondage thereto.

And without the regenerating grace of the Holy Spirit, they are neither able nor willing to return to God to reform the depravity of their nature nor dispose themselves to reformation. But listen to one phrase that I went right by.

Therefore, all men are conceived in sin and by nature children of wrath incapable of saving good. That's a nuance that the Canons of Dort put in after the Heidelberg Catechism which said they can't do any good.

And I appreciate that because I think it recognizes that people do good things that are recognizable as good, recognizable by the standards that God has given us to what constitutes good and what constitutes evil.

They do good things. But it doesn't save them. But God, I believe, is more pleased when people do things that are in accordance with His will even if they don't confess His name than people just outright don't confess His name and you know what?

[16 : 45] Go ahead and murder, rape, pillage. I think He thinks differently about both. See, as we said before, the Samaritan in Jesus' parable has been called good because what He did was good.

It's how people are supposed to act. And given what Paul urges Titus, it's even more so for those whom He has, quote, redeemed from lawlessness so that He might purify for Himself a people of His own possession for His own possession who are zealous to do good works.

We talked previously that one of the benefits of God's common grace is the restraining of evil. And one way that's done is through God appointing civil authorities who are to reward good and punish evil.

But you know, another way is by the Holy Spirit influencing the hearts and minds of people to behave in a manner that reflects the way human beings have been created to live.

Let me quote another theologian, Charles Hodge. The Holy Spirit as the spirit of truth, of holiness, and of life in all its forms is present with every human mind enforcing truth, restraining from evil, exciting to good, and imparting wisdom or strength when, where, and in whatever measure seems good to Him.

[18 : 01] See, I'm going to suggest that the ability of people to respond with empathy or to create a story that prompts empathy is evidence of the interior operation of common grace.

Now, let's go to shift our thinking for just a few more minutes. And let's turn to Paul in Athens. Now, this is a well-known passage and it's the one that people go to primarily when we're being encouraged to engage in contextually appropriate apologetics and evangelism.

It provides a model for how we might go about explaining the gospel in a setting that's dominated by a set of ideas and values that are not Christian. And so I'll borrow from Dan Strange as he outlines how we go about doing this based upon Paul's methodology.

He gives us four E's. First, it's enter. Step into the world and listen to the story. Verse 23, for as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship in chapter 17.

Then you explore, searching for elements of grace and the idols attached to them. Men of Athens, Paul says, I perceive that in every way you are very religious for as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription to the unknown God.

[19 : 14] And then he says what we do is we expose. We show up the idols as destructive frauds. Paul says this, being then God's offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold or silver or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of man.

And lastly, we evangelize, showing off the gospel of Jesus Christ as what he calls subversive fulfillment. What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you, Paul says.

That's a very helpful analysis of what, how Paul went about, you know, making the gospel known in settings such as he was. But I'm going to suggest, however, the underlying reality that allows for this kind of engagement is common grace.

See, if we go back through that passage, it's, we'll see that it's what we have in common, what they have in common, Paul and the people he's speaking to, that provides a bridge between him and them.

Because he says, as created by God, verse 22, that they have a shared religious impulse. Verse 25, they have a shared source of existence. Verse 26, they have a shared humanity.

[20 : 25] Verse 28, they have a shared dependence. Verse 30, they have a share, they're sharing a season of common grace. And lastly, they have a shared need for particular grace.

See, he makes a whole lot of connections between those people and himself. He's able to speak as he does because there are just things about human existence that they both share.

And so, by the end, you know, he says what he says, that he calls everywhere to repent and put their faith in Christ. But it was common grace that created a bridge for the gospel engagement that he engaged in.

See, Paul uses elements of common grace. He talks about their culture. He uses their reason. He points to their longing for a God who will solve things to share saving grace.

And what we learn, I think, in Timothy is that compassionate living makes a difference. Christians are called to do good. Honor leaders, seek the welfare for all. These are things that create a bridge.

[21 : 31] Common grace can be a bridge that crosses the spiritual divide. And as in Paul's encounter in Athens, common grace prepares hearts, saving grace transforms them.

Because how does he, how does he end the encounter? How does Luke end the encounter? He says, now when they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some mocked, but others said, we'll hear you again about this.

So Paul went out from their midst. But some men joined him and believed, among whom also were Dionysius, the Areopagite, and a woman named Damaris and others with him. Now we know their ability to believe is something that the Holy Spirit does because of particular or saving grace.

But why go through the argument? Why go through the apologetic, the evangelistic effort? And what does he use when he does that? Common grace.

Schumann experience that they both share. So, what do we do with this? Well, let me suggest a couple of things. First of all, we want to find points of connection with unbelievers through shared experiences and values.

[22 : 40] We want to find connection with unbelievers through shared experiences and values. Listen to this. Jesus was connected to the human experience. He provided for a good time at a wedding.

He enjoyed table fellowship with lots of different people. He had compassion on the crowds. They were like a sheep without a shepherd. He was angry at the Pharisee for not seeing how the man with the withered hand was suffering.

He kept Peter from drowning when Peter doubted. He rehumanized the sinful woman in the eyes of the Pharisee who scorned her. He wept at Lazarus' tomb. He understood why Peter denied him and he loved him anyway.

Jesus gets it. So we can get it. That is, that we are shared human beings, shared experiences and values and we find them because they're present, because Christianity has been present shaping hearts and minds.

And we can be gracious, secondly, and hopeful in public life, right? We can be grateful and hopeful in public life, not cynical and separatist. Let me suggest that you look for offers, you look for causes, excuse me, look for causes that offer hope that you can support.

[23 : 52] They don't all need to be explicitly Christian. If they operate with values that reflect the values of the kingdom, then you can get involved. Safe working conditions, clean streets, neighborhood associations to strengthen your community.

These are valuable things to be part of and where you meet other people who want the same thing that you want, which is a good thing. Not just that they want the same thing, that's good, but the thing that they want is good, by God's standards.

And secondly, don't jump on the bandwagon of political movements that are bereft of the kind of values that God expects his people to promote. It shouldn't be too hard to figure out what I'm talking about right now. I mean, what's going on in America with the Christian church attaching themselves to this profligate, wayward, hard-hearted, lustful man is just beyond knowing.

But can you imagine if the church actually called that out graciously and humbly, what a difference it would make. What a difference it would make for the public. Instead of marches in the streets out of fear for what Trump's going to do next, they would be marching with people to say, we care.

We care about what happens to people. Thirdly, let common grace drive us to proclaim saving grace with humility and love. Remember what Paul said to Titus?

[25 : 15] For we ourselves were once foolish, disobedient, led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures, passing our days in malice and envy, hated by others and hating one another.

We have nothing in which to boast except Christ and his cross. And it allows us then to understand the human condition, the hard hearts that we all have apart from saving grace, to know that indeed we were just like them in some way, shape, or form.

And so we come to proclaim saving grace with humility and love. Tonight, we're going to consider how important it is to maintain our distinctiveness as Christians.

We don't want to blur the lines. I don't want to put too much confidence in common grace because it can do that. It can blur the lines. Because no matter how much we can see that even fallen human beings do things that would be considered good by God, they do not amount to work that regenerates, that provides saving righteousness.

So it's important to pursue a life worthy of the gospel, but there's a reason for it. And I believe, we'll find out tonight, it has something to do with common grace. You know, I just want to, I've said this in one way, but let me just close with just a short, small, little thing.

[26 : 35] You know, common grace was something that I discovered that was like liberating. And it was liberating because I had been disciplined in a very kind of pietistic holiness kind of mentality.

Right? Everything was out there and here's what's going on here. And in the church and out there, you know? And so, I shared this story once before, but I'll share it again because it was so important for me.

So Barbara and I, you know, we were in the theater. We studied to be actors. We were professional actors. We moved to New York for that very purpose. And after getting there, I was converted. Barbara's renewed her faith in Christ and life changed for a lot of different reasons.

But one day, I ran into a fellow on the street who we had gone to school with and we had worked with and who we were friends with. We liked him very much. He's a good guy. And he was gay.

And when I ran into him on the street, I said, oh, hey, wow, how are you doing? And he shared at that moment that he wasn't doing well because his longtime partner had just died of AIDS.

[27 : 43] And, you know, I didn't know how to respond. That might sound weird to some of you, but I didn't know how to respond. Because really, what I had been taught was, well, what do you expect? Play around with sin?

That's the fruit of sin. That's what Paul says, right? But the reality is that standing before me was a man with a broken heart. And there must have been some way, some way, I could have offered comfort in that moment.

Why? Because the desire to be loved, to be in companionship, is a real human desire. We do it in the wrong ways. We can do it in ways that are outside of the will of God, but nonetheless, the desire is there.

And it stuck with me. I just felt kind of, frankly, sort of unclean after I left. I had just, just not gotten it.

And I was also influenced by the fact that I had two little kids with me. Hannah was very young. Caleb was with me. And you think, oh, I've got a good example for the kids. You know, I can't affirm, you know, I don't know what I was thinking, but anyway, it didn't work.

[28 : 47] And it really, really made a difference to me. And so I really had to begin to think about that some more. And I would argue in the providence of God, this whole concept, the common grace, just made so much sense to me.

Because what that means is that in the middle of a relationship of people around us that we share so much, we bring this message of particular grace, saving grace, and it makes so much more sense in that context.

Because suddenly, we're talking about a faith that really meets the need. A faith that really makes sense of what's going on. A faith that really shines light so that we can truly understand.

Everything else, people are groping around, they're doing that because they're made in the image of God, they're doing that because we have these religious impulses, we have shared humanity, all these things that are part of who we are, and because their hearts are hard, they're going in all different directions.

But when you come along with the message, ah, I get it, I get it. But this is the solution. This is how Jesus comes and meets that need and at the same time kind of cuts the rug out from the things that you've been putting your hope and trust in.

[29 : 58] Well, that was important for me. And so I'm grateful because it also allowed me to go back into the world and enjoy the things that I enjoy. You know, I don't mean the sinful things, I mean the things that are just good, just to enjoy them.

And I know I said this last time and I'll say it one more time and I know you don't understand because you guys are Scottish and you don't play baseball, but I just saw a video the other day of a guy catching a ball, running full tilt, caught the ball right just in his glove before it hit the ground.

So it was a clean catch, we call that a clean catch. He looks up and he sees a guy has left first base thinking that the ball was going to get by him and he's going to round and score, but he caught it.

So he's got to get back to the base before the ball gets back to the base. This guy fires a rocket, gets to the base, the guy's tagged out. Amazing. Amazing.

I have no idea what these guys do in their off time, but on the baseball field they are astounding. And I really appreciate it and I don't feel at all guilty for appreciating that.