

Common Grace: God's Gift to All

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Date: 06 July 2025

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[0 : 0 0] Now, in order for me to come here as a missionary with Mission to the World, I had to get a working visa. And that I did. And it runs out next Monday, not this Monday, the following Monday, July 14th.

So that means that my preaching morning and evening here, and morning and evening next week here, will be my last official duties. And that might be a good thing, because after you've listened to me for four, you might say, you know, Kirk, that's enough.

So what I hope to do over these next four services is to talk about the theological concept of common grace.

Common grace. Now, that might be something that's very familiar to some of you, that terminology. For others, it might be new information. So I'm hoping it will be profitable for both parties.

For the one, it would be a refresher and hopefully a provocation to embrace this theological concept and its implications with zeal. For others, I think it might be liberating, as it was for me when I first learned of it.

[1 : 0 8] Now, I'd like to begin with four slides, which I believe will help us illustrate what's meant by common grace. Slide number one, please. That is the new Govan to Partick footbridge.

And that's the view that's coming from Govan, above Govan, looking towards Partick, where the bridge rests on the plaza of the Riverside Museum. Number two. That shows a detail of the design of the bridge.

Number three. That's opening day. The whole bridge is packed. So I guess we can trust that the engineering was anticipating that unusual load.

And then the fourth. Here's a bridge that people are actually crossing over. And that one shows, therefore, the benefit of the bridge.

It connects one neighborhood to another that formerly would have required a lot more effort to move between them than simply walking across this well-designed, well-purposed product of human ingenuity.

[2 : 1 6] And I think the new Govan-Partick footbridge has a helpful illustration by what we mean of common grace. Thank you. But let's first pursue a definition.

Common grace is differentiated from particular grace. Common grace is differentiated from particular grace. Particular grace or saving grace, that's the grace that God bestows in a human being when, by the Holy Spirit, He awakens a person to their need to be saved from God's righteous and final judgment.

It's the grace that Paul speaks of when he says, You were dead in your trespasses and sins, but God, being rich in mercy because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our trespasses, made us alive together with Christ.

For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing. It's the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast. That is particular grace.

A particular grace bestowed on those particular people whom God chooses. A common grace is called common, not because it's unremarkable or because it's not a good and precious gift, but because it is a grace that is experienced by everyone commonly.

[3 : 35] Now, you've probably heard the name John Calvin, famous 16th century reformer and the father, frankly, of the reformed faith that we all confess. Now, he's seen as the one who most fully recognized in the Bible what came to be called common grace.

One person notes that Calvin developed alongside the doctrine of particular grace, the doctrine of common grace. Common grace does not pardon nor purify human nature.

It does not affect the salvation of sinners. However, it curbs the destructive power of sin, maintains in a measure the moral order of the universe, and distributes in varying degrees and gifts and talents among men.

And what that does is promote the development of science and art, showers untold blessings upon the children of men. Abraham Kuyper, Dutch theologian from the late 19th, early 20th century, says, Calvin put forward the great principle that there is a particular grace which works salvation and also a common grace by which God, maintaining the life of the world, relaxes the curse upon it, arrests its process of corruption, and allows the free development of our life in which to glorify himself as creator.

So, when God instructs Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to be fruitful and multiply, he doesn't just mean to have a lot of babies. He means that they are to harness the potential that God has built into creation as they use it, that potential to exercise dominion over creation, in a way that brings out all of its blessing, and so brings all glory to God.

[5 : 23] Now, how is this notion that God bestows favor even on those who don't acknowledge him, or even defy him defended in Scripture? Well, I argue that it's embedded in that pre-fall language of Genesis chapter 1, be fruitful and multiply and have dominion, but it's also evident in language that we read from Psalm 145.

Listen again. The Lord is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made.

So, verse 8, verse 8 is language we associate with God's care for his particular people, his steadfast love. Steadfast love translates that important Hebrew word *chesed*.

It is God's loving kindness for his people that's grounded in covenant. God has promised his steadfast love to his people. An account of that steadfast love, as the Psalm says, Israel experiences that the Lord is gracious, merciful, and slow to anger.

So, verse 8 is an expression of particular grace. God choosing and covenanting with a people chosen from all the nations of the earth to be his particular people.

[6 : 35] But verse 9, we learn that God's care extends not just to Israel, but to everyone. The Lord is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made.

So, we can discern that distinction, right? In this verse, God's grace towards his people, that particular grace, and his grace towards everyone. But both experience the same second grace that we call common, because we experience it commonly.

And why would we call it grace? Because, what's the classic definition of grace? Unmerited favor. Unmerited favor. Now, there was nothing inherently good about Israel that calls God to make a covenant with them.

He chose them just because he chose them. And the all, in verse 9, includes every follower of another God or no God. So, as being good to all is indeed unmerited favor.

It's grace bestowed on everyone in common. Now, how is God's common grace experienced? Well, it's experienced through the sustaining of creation.

[7 : 47] What did we read in Matthew chapter 5? It says, Jesus teaches us that God makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good. He sends the rain on the just and the unjust.

See, the commonly enjoyed benefits of sun and rain are not something that just happens as some random intersecting and interacting of impersonal forces of nature.

Jesus says the sun and the rain are gifts from God given to all, independent of their relationship with him and whether their personal behavior lines up with his will.

They fall on the just and the unjust, the evil and the good. That's common grace in action. And in this case, we see God's common grace sustaining creation.

And by that sustaining, blessing human beings and all creatures who depend upon the fruitfulness that he has built into creation. What's another way that we might say we experience God's common grace?

[8 : 46] Well, it's through the restraining of sin, as Calvin notes. You know, you're probably familiar with Romans chapter 1, where we read about how Paul is not ashamed of the gospel because the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all godliness and unrighteousness and the men who suppress the truth in unrighteousness.

Yes, in unrighteousness. But what does he say as he goes on in that passage? He talks about these people having exchanged the glory of the immortal God for images resembling mortal man and birds and animals and creeping things.

Therefore, God gave them up in the lust of their hearts to impurity because they exchanged the truth about God for a lie. For this reason, God gave them up to dishonorable passions.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, they gave them up to a debased mind. That giving up suggests that you're holding back. Right? He makes a decision at one point to say, oh, yeah, go ahead.

Now, you've met one of my first children's talks with my dog Buster, my little Jack Russell Terrier. I'm sure that was imprinted upon your conscience. Buster was a Jack Russell.

[9 : 51] And Jack Russell was like, to go. They owned the street. And the dog run that we would bring Buster to was across a four-lane highway with people going by. Sort of like, I don't know, Great Western Road or something.

And to get him across the highway, you had to walk him across the street. Well, Buster could care less about the traffic. He could care less about the fact that they were going by.

He just wanted to go, wanted to go, wanted to go. But I had to hold him back. We all had to hold him back because he wants to get to the dog run. But if God, if Buster was these people that talks, God talks about in Romans chapter one, just let go of the leash.

And Buster goes across the road. Buster gets hit by a car and he's done. See, God restrains through common grace. Things are not as bad as they could be.

We all talk about the depravity of human beings and I believe it. But things are not as bad as they could be. And in fact, we live in a society that is free. We can move about. We can go to a store.

[10 : 53] We can get up. We can go to sleep. We can do things really without a lot of fear. That's God's common grace. Not just for us gathered in this room who confess Christ, but for every person who lives all the way around us.

So there's a restraining of sin. And the restraining of sin is also evident when God grants authority to civil rulers, right? Whom he considers his servants, Paul says in Romans chapter 13.

They're supposed to reward the good and punish the evil. They don't always do it, but that's their purpose. So the sustaining of creation and the restraining of sin are two ways in which we can experience what Psalm 145 says, The Lord is good to all.

His mercy is over all that he has made. Now, why is this important? Because I think it's the case that in different circles of Christianity, what they see is a great, even irreconcilable divide between the things of heaven and the things of earth.

Of being worldly minded and being heavenly minded. And of course, there's reason for this. Let me consider this language from Jesus. Do not lay up for yourself treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal.

[12 : 04] But lay up for yourself treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust destroys and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Or this language from the apostle John. Do not love the world or the things of the world.

If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world, the desires of the flesh, the desires of the eyes, the pride of life is not from the Father, but it's from the world. And the world is passing away along with its desires, but whoever does the will of God abides forever.

Now, it's safe to say that those are warnings that we need to take to heart. The world is something to be wary of. We can define the world by the sum of the divine creation which has been shattered by the fall.

The sum of the divine creation which has been shattered by the fall, which stands under the judgment of God, in which Jesus Christ appears as Redeemer. Now, it's that understanding of the world with which I was discipled in my formative years of my Christian life.

I was made to feel the very strong warning of the apostle John, do not love the things of the world. The things of the world were to be considered out of bounds. And as a result, Barbara and I soon left behind many friends and many things that we enjoyed.

[13 : 23] See, what this view of the world brought with it was confusion for me. Where before I may have had a few enemies, I mean, everybody has somebody that doesn't like them, now I had several billion of them out in the world.

The people who once I once had affection were now folks to be first shunned and then conquered. And not only were people to be looked at upon this way, their achievements from which once I may have derived pleasure and even admired were now considered products of worldliness.

Though secretly I would have still appreciated a well-turned double play by the Yankees or a facile riff by some alto sax player, such responses were not without tinges of worldliness.

What resulted was a denial in my mind of God working in the world by his Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit was certainly involved in directly overturning the condition of a soul.

But the only non-saving arena in which he worked would be nature. Now, I'm willing to admit that perhaps I was a bit over the top in my response to this idea of the world.

[14 : 28] But I suspect, however, that I am not alone. You know, I don't know if you ever got these here, but I would get these things when I was pastoring the church in the Northeast, a cover art for bulletins. When you had a hard copy, they put a picture on the front of it and there was just a standard blank thing that you would print out your own things on the inside.

More often than not, all the pictures that came in on the cover art were always of nature. And there'd be some verse about God created everything in his majesty and his glory. All true. Sometimes there would be something that a human being made, but it would always be a church and it would always be a country church, a small little church.

Never once was there a skyscraper, you know, an automobile, a bridge. It was always things that somehow kept the world at bay because those are things that human beings do.

That's not things that God does. Well, such things communicate the notion that virtually anything that man touches, apart from the things which directly relate to the activities associated with a church building, are not worth including.

But if God is glorified in his creation, the heavens declare the glory of God, the sky above proclaims his handiwork, the psalm says. Then is it impossible that God can be glorified in the work of his highest order of creation, that is human beings?

[15 : 47] So when the skyscraper rises from the ground in a place like Glasgow, we can see on the one hand that impulse of Babylon, but we can also see the prowess of the one made in the image of God.

Again, now some of this might just be old stuff for some of you. You've dealt with all this before, but for those of us who have been influenced by this kind of far-reaching pietism, there isn't an easy assessment to make.

It takes some time, some help to get to where you feel as though we can be friends with our neighbors just because it's good to be a friend and to have friends, or to enjoy the wonders which man can accomplish simply because they're wonderful.

For instance, some years ago, I had the opportunity to see an exhibit of drawings by Leonardo da Vinci that had been assembled by the Metropolitan Museum Art in New York City.

It was extraordinary. It was truly extraordinary. More than a few of the drawings displayed such virtuosity that it was hard to contemplate that this had actually come from the hand of a mere human being.

[16 : 51] But there was a time, however, when I and the fellow members of my church community at that time would have considered such an achievement frivolous. This is very unfortunate. It's very unfortunate to look at what da Vinci does and consider it frivolous.

There are many wonderful accomplishments that are to be celebrated and enjoyed, things that are achieved by both the elect and the non-elect. See, how do we account for the presence of such things in a world that has been so profoundly affected by sin and received such a harsh evaluation on the pages of Scripture?

Can human beings who stand in inherent rebellion against their Creator be capable of doing things that bring glory to God and in which God delights?

I believe they can. I believe they can if we acknowledge the coexistence of God's particular grace and God's common grace.

You see, and this is important, the world that we need to be wary of is not a place but a mindset, an attitude of the heart, a state of the soul.

[18 : 03] See, in Genesis we hear God declare that all that He has made is very good, including those whom He created to bear His image, to be His representatives, His likeness in the world that He had made. We learn from those first image bearers, well, that they failed their assignment, their great commission, if you will.

And that failure let loose the corruption that has affected humanity and the earth that we still live in, but we must acknowledge that creation is still good. And how do we know that?

Because God causes the rain to fall and the sun to shine, and when it does, it brings with it many blessings. Blessings that are still evident, built into God's creation, and our unsaved neighbors continue experiencing it because of God's grace.

When God made His pronouncement to the man and the woman and the serpent, after they had fallen, about what they had done had radically altered their relationship to Him and the ground on which they lived, He says to the man, Cursed is the ground because of you. In pain you shall eat all the days of your life, thorns and thistles shall bring forth for you, and you shall eat the plants of the field.

By the sweat of your face you shall eat bread, till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken, for you are dust, and to dust you shall return. See, Adam's relationship with the ground had changed. It was no longer a friendly source of sustenance, easily yielding its produce.

[19 : 25] It was now something he was going to have to wrestle with, but it was still going to produce. It was still going to provide. There's not an inherent problem with the ground. The problem is with us.

So despite the failing of the man, creation is still good. The potential is still there, waiting to be harnessed. Let's return then to this footbridge over the River Clyde. I said it was a helpful illustration of common grace.

First, before we look at anything, before we look at it, first there's a need. See, there was a ferry that used to connect the Apartheid and Govan. It used to connect those two neighborhoods, but apparently it ceased to run some point in the 60s.

That means that a ready connection between these two neighborhoods has not been available for some 60 years. And Govan acknowledges one of the most needy neighborhoods in Glasgow on a number of levels.

This bridge is part of a larger plan for residential and commercial development to that neighborhood. Glasgow City Council reports that in May of this year, since the public opening last September, there have been more than 820,000 crossings of the bridge by pedestrians and over 185,000 cyclist crossings.

[20 : 40] So that means that in eight to nine months since the bridge had been open, it's been used and it's been used a lot. And now it's July and the numbers for foot traffic must be approaching close to a million or more.

And the bicycle traffic topping 200,000 journeys. That suggests to me that need drove the development of the bridge. And then there's the construction. Slide one, please.

Oh, no, that's a good one. There it is. The council goes on to report that this new bridge is, quote, one of the longest opening pedestrian cycle bridges in Europe.

The Govan-Partik bridge has a width of six meters and two spans. The moving span, it weighs 650 tons and is 99 meters long and uses the south pier at Water Row as its access. And the fixed span weighs 45 tons and it's 15.7 meters long.

Yeah. So this bridge articulates, it moves, it opens up so there can be traffic on the river. Now, I know this church produces or has a lot of engineers.

[21 : 45] But from this layman's point of view, the engineering of that structure is pretty impressive. Now, I've not seen it in action, but at least in theory, the design and construction of the bridge meets a need and does it well.

Then there's the look of the bridge. Number two, please. Yeah. You know, I suppose one could just make a bridge that functionally does the job, that gets people from one neighbor to another, but there's a pleasing aesthetic to this new bridge.

It's nice to look at. Looking at that slide, I think we could say there's even an elegance about the bridge. You know, I traveled with Vernon soon after I came here.

He took me to a rugby match in Edinburgh. And on the way back on the M8, there's a footbridge that was put over about halfway between Glasgow and Edinburgh. And he says, that's my favorite bridge.

And it's a lovely looking bridge. It's the Heart Hill pedestrian bridge. Yeah. It is attractive. I mean, you could just put a bridge, but suddenly there's cladding on it that looks lovely. And, you know, every time I pass under it now, I think of Vernon's statement.

[22 : 51] It's my favorite bridge. See, there's something pleasing about the bridge, something that's edifying, something that's nurturing about the bridge.

And then, let's look at number four. Yeah. See, this structure that we're considering has raised the quality of life for people, particularly those who live in Govan.

It was well designed and well executed. And it looks as if there's an intention to be beautiful. That's edifying. It lifts up the soul. Now, let me ask you a question. How many of the men and women who saw the need for the bridge or designed the bridge or built the bridge or now benefit from the bridge, give glory to God for the bridge?

I'm sure there must be a few. But given the statistics of how many Christians there are in Scotland, I'd say the percentage is very small. Would I be saying too much to suggest it's less than 1% of the people who designed, saw the need, designed, built it, and use it, give glory to God for it.

But whatever the number, there the bridge stands. It stands not due to the obedience of God's revealed will on the part of those in Glasgow and beyond who brought it from dream to reality.

[24 : 08] And not because the project was bathed in prayer or celebrated with a worship service upon its opening. It stands because of the grace of God. That is a grace, a grace expressed to all those who have had a hand and bringing it to pass and experienced by all who are now benefiting from it.

And such evidences of God's grace are all around us in the blessings of nature, the experience of relationships, the product of human ingenuity, and they are experienced by everyone by common grace.

You can take that down. Now what motivates God to exercise grace in this way? I'm going to suggest three things. First, as we learned from Matthew chapter 5.

You've heard that it was said, you shall love your neighbor, hate your enemy. I say to you, love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be, what? Sons of your Father who is in heaven. For that's how he acts.

He allows the sun to rise on the evil and on the good, he sends rain on the just and the unjust. If you only love those who love you, what reward do you have? Do not even tax collectors do the same. If you greet only your brothers, what do you have more than others do?

[25 : 15] Do not even Gentiles do the same. You must be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect. So if our loving, our enemies, imitates the actions of our heavenly Father who makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, sends rain on the just and the unjust, we conclude that one thing that this demonstrates that motivates God is love.

Love motivates him to exercise common grace towards his enemies. Two, and I think we can say that this kind of kindness on the part of God is exercises the goal of leading people to repentance.

That's what Paul teaches in his letter in Romans chapter 2. God's kindness leads you to repentance. Now, again, that statement is said in a very different context, but I think the principle stands.

God's kindness leads, the intention is to lead people to repentance. And lastly, when the capacities of nature and the capacities of those who bear his image are on display, it brings glory to the one who designed, executed, and sustains what he has made.

Put up number three, please. No, it's okay.

[26 : 31] Just give me a shout out if it shows up. So we've considered this bridge an illustration of common grace. It's a product of design and engineering that helpfully crosses the expanse of the Clyde River.

And it's a product of the capacities resident in creation harnessed by human beings. But I also want us to consider the bridge as a metaphor.

It's a metaphor for common grace. See, acknowledging and appreciating common grace is how we can connect with people on the other side of the spiritual divide.

There's so much that we have in common. There's much that we experience in common. There are connections to be made with our unbelieving friends and neighbors through the mutuality of our experience of God's common grace.

So, for instance, in the reworking, the refitting of our property here, it's an important thing to do as an act of good stewardship.

[27 : 35] But it will find its full potential realized when it is used not just for the benefit of those who have been recipients of God's particular grace, but when we explore how it might be a bridge that draws people through common grace initiatives to acknowledge the God who is good to all.

So let me suggest a couple of things in closing. First of all, we need to cultivate gratitude for God's kindness in everyday life. That we be thankful for all the potential that God has built into his creation.

And certainly these capacities can have been misused and abused, but they are there. And the fact that they are there is part of God's good creation. So we give gratitude, we give grace for what God has done.

Recognize God's mercy, secondly, in the world, even outside of the church. Again, the Lord is good to all. His mercy is over all that he has made. It's a mercy. It's a mercy, is it not, that you can go to the doctor and receive care from him or her.

It's a mercy that you can bring your car to the repair shop and there's someone there who knows how to get it back on the road for you. It's a mercy to enjoy music, good food, a beautiful sunset, to laugh at a joke, to receive a warm embrace.

[28 : 50] These are all a mercy. Something that God has given to us that we experience, but so do our neighbors. But lastly, and perhaps most importantly, common grace begins to help us to see unbelievers not only as sinners, but as recipients of good things from the hand of God.

And if we can keep God's love before our face when we consider those outside of the church, we can keep, consider God's kindness when we consider those outside the church, and we consider God's glory, evidence through all that he has made, and how he works in creation to sustain it, to supply it, to harness all of the potential that's in there, that I think we have an ability to then look upon people around us, not as someone we have to keep at arm's length, but someone that we need to learn to be friends with.

Now, we'll talk some more tonight about something that's why we need to be careful and have some wisdom in how we go about doing this. But, you know, to keep this split between what's in the church and outside of the church so rigid, so rigid that we can't cross that divide, then I think we've lost something.

God wants us to see him as he has glorified himself in creation, even by those who hate him. That's how magnificent God is.

That's how powerful God is. That he can take someone who hates him and say, you know what, I want you to build a bridge so that these people can get to work more easily.