

God's Common Grace

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[0:00] Well, in key places in the Bible, when God describes his own character, it's his grace that he often points us to. I think of that verse that's repeated in many, many places.

It's where Moses said to God, show me your glory. And then God came and passed by and declared his glory, saying, the Lord, the Lord is gracious and compassionate.

It was his grace that he speaks of. And that's an oft repeated phrase. The Lord is compassionate and gracious. And I think he's far more gracious than we first may realize.

His grace is shown in far more ways than we may give him credit for. So today I'd like for us to meditate on God's common grace. We most usually think of God's special and saving grace.

But today his common grace, it's common in the sense that it's not that special saving grace that God shows to his elect. Rather, it's grace that he shows for all men, even for those that never will be saved.

[1:12] Now think about that. Men who will live forever in hell under God's wrath. And yet, for a time in this life, he is showing them grace, kindness, goodness.

And so it's common grace. And yet, though it's not saving grace, it is grace because it's undeserved kindness from the Lord. So we might define common grace.

As every good thing short of salvation, which this undeserving sin, cursed world enjoys from the hand of God. Every good thing short of salvation is not that, which undeserving and sin, cursed world enjoys at the hands of God.

And I'm drawing much from Professor John Murray and Donald MacLeod in this study on common grace. So common grace can be seen to work in two ways, negatively and positively.

And we'll look at the negative way first. It works negatively in this sense, in that he restrains the bad. He's restraining the bad.

[2:28] Two ways God restrains the bad. And it's bad from man's perspective, as you'll see in this first point. First of all, God restrains his own wrath. Now, his own wrath is good.

There's nothing evil about it. But from man's perspective, it's something that we would want restrained. And so that's one way God restrains the bad.

He restrains his own wrath. This earth stands under the curse of God because of man's sin. And yet God holds back much of his own wrath.

What do all people deserve because of sin? It's hell. And when should that start? First breath.

Immediately. Soul that sins, it shall die. The day you eat of it, you shall die. So men deserve hell and they deserve it right away upon entrance into this world as we're conceived in sin.

[3:33] And so every day out of hell for a worldling, a nonbeliever is grace, isn't it? It's true not only of believers, but of all men.

What David says in Psalm 103, that he does not treat us as our sins deserve. At least for now, that is true of all men, isn't it?

Because if he treated the sinner as he deserves, he would send him to hell at once. So he's getting better than what he deserves. That's grace. And that's what we're talking about.

Common grace. That grace that is shown to the reprobate. Now, the Bible speaks of God's patience and long-suffering.

And that's an exercise of his common grace, isn't it? That he's slow to anger and he holds back his wrath. Even to sinners who will never be saved.

[4:39] Romans 9.22 tells us of God enduring with much long-suffering the vessels of wrath fitted for destruction. And in the context, he's talking about Pharaoh.

Pharaoh is not one of those sinners that God was going to show saving grace to. And yet he showed common grace to him, didn't he? He showed much long-suffering toward that vessel of

wrath.

When did Pharaoh deserve to come under God's wrath? Right away. With his first sin. Think of how long God bore with him. Ten plagues long.

In 1 Peter 3.20, the Bible says God waited patiently in the days of Noah while the ark was being built. Some 120 years. God withheld his wrath.

God was incensed with the earth so much that he was going to wipe mankind off of the face of the earth with a global flood. But he waited patiently.

[5 : 46] He held back his wrath. All those years. Think of all the grace that God is showing every day as men continually sin against him.

And he does not pour out his wrath immediately upon them. So that's the first way that God restrains the bad. He restrains his own wrath.

But secondly, and what we need to give more thought to perhaps this morning, is that God restrains man's depravity. Not only restrains his own wrath, but he restrains man's depravity.

Now, as Calvinists, we believe in total depravity. It's the T in tulip. But we've got to be clear on what we mean by total depravity and what we don't mean.

Some people hold to a doctrine of total depravity that would deny common grace. And they would say, everything that I'm saying this morning is not true. God doesn't have any grace to show of any kind to those who will never be saved.

[6 : 52] He only shows grace to the elect. I don't believe the Bible teaches that. But one of the reasons men hold to such an erroneous view is because they think by total depravity something that the Bible doesn't teach.

Total depravity does not mean that man is as depraved and sinful as he could be. That all men are as wicked as they could be.

But rather by total depravity, we mean that the totality of his being has been affected by sin. That all of man's faculties, that's the word total.

The totality of his being are bent on evil. The mind is not neutral. Rather, the mind as it thinks is bent on evil.

The affections as they desire, bent on evil. The will as it chooses, it's bent on evil. So the totality of man is bent towards sin. But it doesn't mean that all sinners are as low as they may get.

[7 : 58] The potential for every sin is within the sinner's heart. But in grace, God holds back. He holds man back from manifesting all the potential wickedness within him.

He restrains sinners from carrying out all that their depraved hearts and sinful passions desire to do. Now, some weeks ago, we looked at Romans chapter 1, where we see that God gives some men over and gives them over to their own sinful desires to do what their hearts want to do.

But the very fact that God gives some men over argues that what? He doesn't give all men over. That means that he still is restraining and holding some men back from all the evil that they could do.

So not all men are so bad that God has given them all over. He's still holding back many from their wicked desires.

Job 5 and verse 12 says, God thwarts the plans of the crafty so that their hands achieve no success.

[9 : 16] Okay? God thwarts the plans of the crafty. So the crafty, here's the sinner. He's got plans to sin. His mind's thinking evil. His affections want evil.

And if he could, he would do evil. But what happens? God thwarts his plans. He's not able to do the evil that he would so that his hands achieve no success.

Job 5, 12. Give me some examples from scripture of God graciously frustrating the desires of evil men. And what they wanted to do. What they planned to do.

And what they tried to do. Jim? Saul wanted to kill David. Saul wanted to kill David. More than once. Why didn't he kill David? Well, God restrained him.

God put up roadblocks. God used the Philistines one time to save David. In many various ways, God delivered him. He frustrated Saul. Other examples.

[10 : 14] Becky? The men in Sodom wanted to get to the angels of the Lord. That's right. They wanted to go in and lay hold of those two men in Lot's house.

Why didn't they? What happened to them, Becky? Remember how God restrained them? Somebody help her.

He blinded them. They couldn't find the door. That's the only reason they didn't abuse those two men that were angels. Other examples.

Oh, my. Mickey. Mickey. Haman would have wiped out all the Jewish race. You remember how God thwarted that.

Somebody else back here. Roger? Joseph's brothers wanted to kill David. Okay. Dennis? Balaam wanted to curse his group.

[11:14] He wanted to pay off, didn't he? Jim? They stunk Paul and left him for dead. They wanted him dead, didn't they? They were frustrated in their designs.

Many others were as well, where they locked up the city gate and he had to be let out over a basket. Dave? Sennacher of Jerusalem. All right.

We've seen that in Isaiah, haven't we? God put a hook in his nose and took him right back to his own homeland where he wiped him out there. Somebody else over here? All right. Steve and then Bruce.

The Jews wanted to stone Jesus. Many times the Jews wanted to kill Jesus. And those times were thwarted until it was God's time. Bruce?

He's going to use and teach Jonah. Hmm. Okay. So Jonah's plan was to not go to Nineveh. And God knew how to thwart his plan and to turn him around.

[12:12] So in many ways, the scriptures give us these examples of evil men who wanted to do evil but couldn't.

It wasn't just that their plans fizzled out on their own. There's a God who restrains and blocks men from being able to carry out their purposes of evil.

Can you not see that that's grace? Does that not make this world a much better place to live in? What if God didn't do that? What if God just left all men to do whatever their wicked hearts suggested?

It's a wonderful grace that God is holding back evil and only allowing that which will serve his eternal purposes to be exercised in his earth.

So how does God hold back depraved desires? What are some of the instruments? We've already seen some of them. But think of this.

[13:20] There's a conscience. And God puts a conscience in man. And conscience sometimes checks men from doing what they would want to do. And I think we're going to study conscience once these missionaries have visited us and are gone to see more of that faculty that God has given us.

But conscience itself in man keeps back men from doing what they otherwise might do. How does human governments, how does God use government to check men's evil?

We're all were new. Okay. Hitler had a plan, didn't he? He wanted to conquer the world.

And God had other plans for the world. And so he thwarted them. So he used governments to fight against them. Ed? The government has the sword.

The scripture says it's great evil. Okay. Why do you suppose that not every man who hates his neighbor goes over and shoots him at night?

[14:30] Well, there's a sword. There is justice that governments wield that he knows he could get caught in that fear of punishment. Why do even evil men obey the traffic laws?

Why do they stop when the sign says stop? His evil heart might like to just ignore everybody else and just drive selfishly for himself.

But there's the fear of punishment, isn't there? That's government exercising a restraining role. God's restraint upon wicked men.

Why don't men rob banks when money's tight? But there is a fear of being caught. And that is a great deterrent to crime. The Bible teaches that.

And that's why those that carry the sword, those that implement justice in nations, are called God's ministers. They're ministering, just as I'm ministering today.

[15:29] They are called ministers. And they minister his wrath. They minister his punishment. They do in the world what he once done. Listen to what Luther said.

It is the hangman that hinders me from sinning. As chains, ropes, and strong bands hinder bears, lions, and other wild beasts from tearing and rending in pieces all that come in their way.

The hangman, the executioner, hinders people from sinning. So government provides a stable framework in which men can live peaceful and quiet lives.

That's common grace. That's something that God does for all men. Not just for Christians, but even for those that will one day perish. How about public opinion?

Do you think that exercises a restraining force on evil in the world? You just have to note our politicians. They're always checking public opinion.

[16:32] Why? They don't want to be on the outs with public opinion. There's a certain power. There's a certain force that the consensus plays upon the individual.

We don't want to be the odd man out. And as long as that consensus is good and moral and upright, then that consensus can be used to restrain evil in the midst of citizens or in the midst of the group, whatever that group may be.

A fear of man and what men will think. So there may not be punishment from the government to fear, but there may just be the shame. So some who lust in their hearts after other women and men don't go so far as to commit outward adultery, not because fear of punishment from government, but because of a fear of shame that would be brought upon them if they were found out.

And so we see this influence. As long as I said, as long as the moral consensus is biblical, that does create a restraint on evil.

But that restraining influence in our own country is waning, isn't it? Because more and more of evil is being called good. And so people who once would have looked very askance and looked down upon someone who was unfaithful in marriage may now just think, well, that's just the way it is.

[18:05] And if you don't like them, you divorce them. And that's very acceptable. And on you go. So there's not as much of that influence. Nevertheless, it's there in different ways restraining evil.

It's largely lost in large cities as well where people don't know each other. And so you can get away in Chicago. You can get away with stuff in Chicago.

You can't get away in Bremen. In Bremen, you would be the conversation at the barbershop or at the coffee shop. And everybody would be talking about you.

And that would shame you. But in Chicago, nobody knows you. So something of that influence is being eroded as there's a move to the larger cities and where people don't know each other.

Think about the very presence of Christians in the world. Does that have a good effect upon the unbeliever? Jesus says we're the light of the world.

[19:05] We're the salt of the earth. We're the preservative that keeps society from rotting more like salt in meat. The very presence of Christians in the world is a grace to the unconverted.

They may not be thankful for us. They may not thank you for living in my town. But we exert a positive force for their good. In fact, God says if I can find just ten of them, I won't send fire and brimstone on Sodom.

So the presence of the righteous in the society of evil men is a blessing to them, even though they don't realize it and often persecute them. So in many ways, I trust many instruments.

God is using government, societal pressures, conscience, fear of punishment, presence of Christians. To restrain evil in man. From what it could be.

So this constant activity of God. God is not sitting idly somewhere on a throne in heaven. He has this constant activity. You think just how depraved and perverted men are.

[20:14] And think what activity God is doing to keep men from acting out all their depraved desires. It should give us a different view of our poor world.

It's easy for me when watching the news or reading the news to just whine and complain about all the evil in the world. As if we would expect something different from depraved sinners.

But if we really believe in total depravity. If we really believe that man at the root is evil. Then we should actually be surprised, shouldn't we?

We should be thankful that the world is in no more rotten of a condition than it is. That there's still so much peace and morality and law and order as we find.

We were over at Winona Lake last night for the concert and fireworks. And families were just milling around all over that place.

[21:12] And I just commented to my wife, that's an unusual thing. I mean, there aren't, not every place in the United States could that kind of thing be happening.

You wouldn't take your kids to certain places. Why? Because of the evil. But there are still places on the earth where it's relatively safe. And an environment that's a pleasing place to raise families.

That ought to shock us if we understand man's heart. It ought to make us thankful for just how much law and order remains. We see what happens when government falls apart.

And when law and order is removed. And so there's much to give thanks for. If we remember that every inclination of the thoughts of man's heart are only evil all the time. Genesis 6, 5 and 8, 21. That's no small feat for which God is to be praised. It's his common grace. [22:14] Now, Calvin said, did the Lord let every mind loose to wanton in its lusts? Doubtless, there's not a man who would not show that his nature is capable of all the crimes which God charges it with.

If he would just let man loose. So we owe the peace and order that we enjoy. Not to any goodness in man. But to God's restraining grace.

And that's grace that this wicked world doesn't deserve. We deserve to see our world turned into hell. We may wonder, where's God in all this evil that we see?

But God is busier with this wicked world than we may first think. He's very busy restraining all sorts of evil every day. So we've seen the negative side of God's common grace.

God shows kindness to unregenerate men who will never be saved by restraining his own wrath and by restraining the evil found in men. Now, there's a positive side to the common grace as well.

[23:21] And it's the things that God gives to unconverted men. Not just what he withholds from them, but there's the good that he gives them. Have you noticed, maybe even, what was it?

Was it Friday or Saturday? It was Friday that it rained, didn't it? Did you notice that the rain fell not just on Christians' fields and gardens? It hit the unbelievers as well.

Well, that should be striking to us. That when the sun shines, it doesn't just land on the righteous, but on the unrighteous as well. And Jesus says that's his father being kind to the ungrateful and to the wicked.

That's common grace. Showing goodness to all men, irrespective of the fact that they're wicked and unrighteous.

So, let's think of the many ways that God gives good things to unregenerate men.

[24:27] What are some? Common grace that lands on the wicked. Good things that God gives. His power. His own power.

His own power. All right. So, his power is exercised in what ways for their good? What does he do for the good of mankind? Somebody said something in the back?

Gives us life and breath and everything else, Paul says, to those pagan polytheists at Mars Hill. God gives you breath. Physical healing. Physical healing. Health. Strength. In our bodies. Men's bodies.

What else does he give them? What do the scriptures say, Dale? Prosperous business because of the Christian worker. Okay. Sometimes it's because of the Christian worker. Do you know any prosperous, unregenerate men who have unregenerate people working for them?

[25:35] They're still prosperous. I just don't want to limit it to just Christians. You're right. Good Christians ought to be the best workers they've got in the shop. But God gives prosperity to wicked businessmen.

Wicked shopkeepers. Bruce? A spouse. A spouse. A wife has a good thing from the Lord. God's giving good things to men.

And giving wives. And to wives' husbands. He's blessing the wicked. Safety. Safety. Yeah? Why is it that every car doesn't crash?

Remember, there's a God behind all that happens. He's showing kindness to the wicked. What else does he give? Friends. The countenance is lifted up by the presence of a friend.

That's a kind thing, isn't it? That God gives us friends. And he doesn't just give Christians friends. He gives worldly people friends. And they're happy because of it. There's a four-letter word.

[26:43] And it's mentioned often in the Bible. Ed, you've got one. Love. Okay. For God so loved the world. What you're talking about falls under this one aspect of the love of God.

These are aspects of his love. His compassion to all men. One that perhaps the Bible speaks more of than any other is food.

Food. God makes a big deal out of that. That he feeds the whole world. God. Not just the righteous. But all his creatures.

Look at Acts 14. We've not had time to turn to many of these texts. But look at Acts 14. Paul's preaching to idolaters at Lystra. And he's not proving the existence of God.

He's just declaring that his God is the creator and the one who rules all things. And he says in Acts 14. 16 and 17.

[27:48] In the past, he, that is God, let all nations go their own way. Yet he's not left himself without testimony. He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven.

And crops in their seasons. He provides you with plenty of food. And fills your hearts with joy. Now, words mean something.

Do you see what he's saying? He's saying that God satisfies the desires of wicked idolaters. He satisfies their desires with good things. He gives them many enjoyments.

There are certain joys that God fills the hearts of wicked men with. The joy of eating a good meal. That's a joy. That's a common grace.

Psalms 104 says, He makes grass grow for the cattle and plants for man to cultivate. Bringing forth food from the earth. Wine that gladdens the heart of man.

[28:51] Oil to make his face shine. And bread that sustains his heart. There are things not only to sustain the health of mankind. But also to sustain the joy and gladness of all mankind.

And this is often repeated. He opens his hand and satisfies the desire of every living thing.

Everything looks to him for food. And he opens up and feeds them.

We ought to be more surprised at the goodness and grace of God in feeding 7 billion people on the planet every day.

And for one reason, why should we be surprised? Because of who they are. Most of them are his enemies. Do you feed your enemies that way?

Well, you ought. That's one of the applications, isn't it? But this is rare, isn't it? This is unusual. And the other thing that makes it unusual is that God knows what they're going to do with the strength from that food that he gives them.

[29:56] What are they going to do with that strength? Well, some of them are going to turn to their idols and say, thank you. Thank you for that rain that came today. God gave it.

And he gave it knowing that they would take that food and that strength and worship their idols with it. He knew some of them would take that breath and that strength and curse him and blaspheme his name and use the very breath they have to misuse the name of the Lord their God.

And he knew some of them would kill Christians with the strength that he gives them with food. How long would you feed a horse that kicked you every day?

How long would you feed a dog that killed your children? We put those kind of animals down, don't we? But God feeds the wicked. Amazing grace that he shows to wicked men.

So it's repeated often. Maybe it's because we overlook the amazing thing that it is. God has cursed the earth and yet, remember that covenant that he entered into?

[31:08] Noah and all mankind and the animals after the flood where he promised us. As long as the earth endures, there will be seed time and harvest.

Cold and heat, summer, winter, day and night will never cease. That's common grace. The earth will constantly bring forth its harvest to keep men alive.

And that on a world that is cursed. That should amaze us. In fact, God is so good to some of the wicked that that has been the source of temptation to his own dear saints and has caused more than one of them to stumble.

Remember Asaph's problem in chapter 73 of Psalms? What was his problem? He was envying the wicked. Why? What had God done to the wicked? He had so blessed the wicked far more in outward things than he had blessed Asaph.

So God is so good to the wicked that it becomes a stumbling block sometimes to even the righteous. That's grace. That's goodness shown to those that don't deserve it.

[32:21] Sometimes the world stumbles over the problem of pain. And they write books about if God is so good, why is there suffering and pain? Now, I'm not belittling the problem of pain and suffering in the universe.

But you notice we never read books about the problem of pleasure. If God is so holy, man is so sinful. And if man is cursed by God because of his sin, why is there any pleasure in the world?

Those are books that we ought to be writing. Those are books we ought to be, questions we ought to be asking. Why is there any pleasure at all for the wicked? Well, it's because of this amazing grace that God shows even to his enemies who take his gifts and use them against him.

But we're thinking of the good things that God gives in his common grace to the sinful world. Food is a big one. And we've spoken of him giving a sense of morality.

Many people do, even without the law, the Gentiles do many of the things that are written in the law. And so there's a sense that conscience is given to men.

[33 : 42] And it creates a world where many good things are done. There's much good in society and in families.

People who reject Christ may be law-abiding citizens contributing to the well-being of society. They may serve their country sacrificially, even giving their lives in wars.

They may have a respect for law and order, life and property and marriage. There are unconverted men who love their wives and love their families.

There are couples who are faithful to one another, that are godless. They're without God. But they're good fathers, good mothers, good husbands, good wives.

1 Timothy 5.8 If anyone does not provide for his relatives and especially for his immediate family, he's denied the faith and he's worse than an unbeliever or an infidel.

[34 : 42] Why is he worse than the unbeliever or infidel? Because the unbeliever provides for his family. The unbeliever doesn't ignore the needs of his children.

So there is this common grace given to even fathers to take care of their families. 1 Peter 2 talks about some of the slave owners.

They're not all harsh. Some are good and gentle. There are businessmen who are unconverted, and yet they're not harsh with their employees. They're good and gentle. It makes for a better world for who to live in?

The reprobate. Those that will never be saved. Many praiseworthy qualities in the lives of sinners, and it's all owing to the grace of God. Pharisees did many good things.

Religious people that are not saved do many good things. Anybody argue with that? They do many good works. In fact, that's what they're hanging on to for entrance into heaven.

[35 : 48] Now, it won't avail, because every one of their goodnesses, in their eyes, is filthiness in God's eyes. It comes short. But it makes the world a better place that they do their deeds of charity and help the poor.

There's cultural and technological achievements that God gives to men. Not all scientists and inventors are Christians. And yet, their positive achievements have made this world a better place to live in.

Cars and airplanes, refrigerators and freezers and telephones and printing presses and computers. Not only are those gods showing his goodness and his grace to the scientists and inventors themselves, but to all the unconverted people who profit from their inventions and their discoveries. Think how many advances have been made in medicine by men who don't even believe in God. They believe in evolution. They don't even believe. But they have been given wisdom and insight to be able to make enough connections to come up with new treatments.

And so we're living beyond some diseases that would have taken our lives in other eras. Calvin says, if the Lord has been pleased to assist us by the work and ministry of the ungodly in physics, dialectics, mathematics, and other scientists, let us avail ourselves of it, lest by neglecting the gifts of God spontaneously offered to us, we'd be justly punished for our sloth.

[37 : 29] So, I'm not going to use this medicine because it was invented by an unbeliever. Calvin says, well, you'll be punished for neglecting to use the gift of God.

So, these are gifts of God that he gives to men. Think of the arts. Unbelieving men and women have skills in painting and sculpture and architecture and decorating and music and writing and cooking.

And they all reflect the creativity of the maker who gives those gifts to men. And they enrich the joy of all men on earth, saved and lost alike.

We heard an orchestra playing music last night that moved my soul. You know that not all Christians or not all composers wrote, who wrote music, were Christians.

Unconverted men have written music that's made me weep. And not all who play the instruments have been Christians. There is common grace.

[38 : 31] God gives good gifts to men, even to unbelieving men. And so, insofar as these contributions of unbelievers do not violate any biblical command or principle, they're to be viewed as gifts of God, not to be despised or rejected.

So, I trust we've seen that there's a lot of grace in the world today that God is showing. Just a couple applications and we're done. Let it stretch your view of God's grace.

Yes, it's only right that we should be thinking of the grace of God revealed in our Lord Jesus Christ. That is the greatest grace. And that's been given to us. But don't stop there.

Continue to read scriptures and to observe in your world all the good things that God is doing for wicked men. If you would have your view of God's grace stretched to see just how amazing His grace is.

How good He is, not just to His friends, but to those who will harden themselves against His good gifts. And hate the giver.

[39 : 37] And yet, suck in the gift. Let this move us to love our enemies. That's one of the reasons Jesus brings it up. You be like your Heavenly Father who does good to those who spitefully use Him.

And thirdly, let it stir us to praise and thanksgiving for life in a world that apart from common grace would be hell on earth. If God just let all men loose, we wouldn't want to live here.

It would be as hell will be one day where there will be no grace. Nothing of God's goodness. So let it move us to praise and thanksgiving.

All His works deserve praise. Don't forget to praise Him for common grace. And then let us prize all the more the special saving grace that has been shown to us in Jesus Christ.

That grace does more than lift up the level of our lives for a few years. Only to end in everlasting wrath. No, saving grace brings us into right relationship with God.

[40 : 41] Introduces us to everlasting life. A quality of life that will go on forever. Let us prize special saving grace.

And look forward to that new heaven and new earth where only righteousness will dwell. And that forever with Christ. Well, our time's up.