

WHAT IS COMMON GRACE?

[DR. TIMOTHY KELLER]

The doctrine of common grace helps us to acknowledge God's goodness in all of creation and enables us to pursue mission with love in a fallen world.

The Bible consistently teaches what theologians have come to call "common grace," a non-saving grace that is at work in the broader reaches of human cultural interaction. This gift of God's grace to humanity in general demonstrates a desire on God's part to bestow certain blessings on all human beings, believer and non-believer alike. Understanding common grace provides the basis for Christians to cooperate with and learn from non-Christians.

BIBLICAL BASIS

Let's explore the teaching on "common grace" in both the Old and New Testaments.

Psalm 19 differentiates between a kind of "wordless speech" about God that comes through nature and tells us about God's glory, and a propositional revelation that comes through the Bible. Romans 1 and 2 suggest that there is a primordial knowledge of God possessed by all human beings. God's law is written on the heart of every human being (Romans 2:14-15), and every person is born with an innate sense of honesty, justice, and love so that we are "without excuse" (Romans 1:20). Scripture's testimony is that all people know at some deep level that there is a God, that we are his creatures, and that we know we should serve him as Creator-God.

In the book of James we see that "every good and perfect gift comes down from above . . . from the father of lights" (James 1:17). This means that every act of goodness, wisdom, justice, and beauty—no matter who does it—is being enabled by God. It is a gift, and therefore some form of grace. For example, there is a general understanding among Christians that nature reveals God apart from the Bible. That is, most understand that even beyond the Bible and saving faith, God reveals himself generally to all people through the magnificence of nature, as they view the ocean, the mountains, and other breathtaking grandeur. "The heavens declare the glory of God; the skies the work of his hands" (Psalm 19:1).

But God also shows common grace by revealing knowledge of himself through human culture, for human culture is simply a wise recognition and cultivation of nature. Isaiah 28:23-29 states, "When a farmer plows for planting . . . when he has leveled the surface . . . does he not plant wheat in its place, barley in its plot, and spelt in its field? His God instructs him and teaches him the right way . . . Grain must be ground to make bread . . . all this also comes from the Lord Almighty, wonderful in counsel and magnificent in wisdom." This is remarkable. Isaiah tells us that anyone who becomes a skillful farmer or excels in agricultural science is being taught by God. One commentator writes about this text: "What appears as a discovery (the proper season and conditions for sowing, farm management, rotation of crops, etc.) is actually the Creator opening his book of creation and revealing his truth."¹

1. J. Alec Motyer, *The Prophecy of Isaiah: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 235.

It is important to note that all human culture ultimately follows the same pattern as farming. Every advancement in human learning, every work of art, and every scientific discovery is simply God “opening his book of creation and revealing his truth” to us. Of course, the vast majority of farmers in the history of the world did not know that God was doing this, but Isaiah says that God was at work. This is general revelation, or as theologians call it “the doctrine of common grace.” All artistic expressions, skillful farming, scientific discoveries, medical and technological advances are expressions of God’s grace. An example from Scripture is found in Exodus 31, where we read how Bezalel was “filled with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability, and knowledge in all kinds of crafts to make artistic designs.” Here we see that artistic skill is something that comes from God.

In Isaiah 45:1 we read of Cyrus, a pagan king that God anointed with his Spirit and chose for world leadership. In Genesis 20:6ff we read how God prevents another pagan king from falling into sin. This is an indication of how God’s Spirit does not only function as a non-saving ennobling force in the world, but also as a non-saving restraining force in the world. This is not the Spirit working as a converting or sanctifying agent but rather working to give wisdom, courage, creativity and insight—another facet of common grace.

THE EFFECTS OF THE FALL

Paul also says that we “suppress the truth in unrighteousness” (Romans 1:18). This statement has two edges to it. John Calvin strikes the balance of the Reformed tradition when first he wrote about secular (referring mainly to ancient pagan) authors:

...let that admirable light of truth shining in them teach us that the mind of man, though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts. If we regard the Spirit of God as the sole fountain of truth, we shall neither reject the truth itself, nor despise it wherever it shall appear, unless we wish to dishonor the Spirit of God. . . . Those men whom Scripture [1 Corinthians 2:14] calls “natural men” were, indeed, sharp and penetrating in their investigation of inferior things. Let us, accordingly, learn by their example how many gifts the Lord left to human nature even after it was despoiled of its true good.²

At the same time, however, Calvin also wrote that while “...in man’s perverted and degenerate nature some sparks still gleam . . . [the light is nonetheless] choked with dense ignorance, so that it cannot come forth effectively. [His] mind, because of its dullness. . . betrays how incapable it is of seeking and finding truth.”³ It is quite interesting that the same person could write these two seemingly contradictory things within just a few pages of one another. Are non-believers capable of the truth or not? Calvin, by giving careful heed to Romans 1, provides the answer “yes and no.”

On the one hand it means that there is no neutrality in the world. Everyone who does not acknowledge Christ as Lord is operating out of a false view of things. No one is objective. Everyone has to live for something; everyone, therefore, has to idolize some fallen thing(s) and demonize some good thing(s). Everyone is operating from a worldview that either honors Christ as the central authority or else denies him. There is no such thing as a neutral vantage point where an observer can view the whole of reality objectively.

On the other hand it means that despite the false worldviews, everyone grasps and to some degree acknowledges truths about God, creation, human nature, and so on. Paul says we “suppress the truth in unrighteousness,” which means that we all initially have the truth in some way.

2. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, II. 2.15

3. Calvin, *Institutes*, II. 2.12

4. Leonard Bernstein, *The Joy of Music* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004), 29.

How then do we integrate these two sides to the doctrine of common grace? This universal knowledge of God and of good has been called “first order beliefs.” Romans 1 and 2 tells us that all people do know that there is a glorious Creator-God. Throughout the Old Testament, the glory of the Lord is said to “fill the whole earth” (e.g. Numbers 14:21). All people have these beliefs, what Calvin called “a sense of the divine,” even if often their conscious, intellectual “second order beliefs” deny God. This means that much—maybe even most—of what non-Christians do will honor or be based on basic truths that they know at one level and yet do not know at another. For example, Leonard Bernstein’s “second order beliefs” were secular and naturalistic. But in a famous television appearance he provided insight to his first order beliefs when he said that listening to Beethoven “make[s] you feel at the finish: Something is right in the world. There is something that checks throughout, that follows its own law consistently: something we can trust, that will never let us down.”⁴ What he was saying was that music gave him not simply good feelings but hinted at a deep structure, a purpose and meaning. Despite the fact that his formal beliefs centered around life as a cosmic accident, and therefore without meaning to anything, music made him feel that there was meaning and purpose to life after all, that it mattered how one lived.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Without an understanding of common grace, Christians will fall prey to many misconceptions.

- For instance, without an understanding of God’s common grace, the world will be a more confusing place. In the movie *Amadeus* (1984), Salieri is totally confused and bitter that he, a morally good person, has so little talent, while Mozart, a morally despicable person, has obviously been blessed with a rare, God-given musical talent. Salieri perceived this situation as a failure of divine justice; but in fact his problem was a failure to understand the doctrine of common grace. God gives good gifts of wisdom, talent, beauty, and skill graciously, that is, in completely unmerited ways. He casts them across the human race like seed, in order to enrich, brighten, and preserve the world. Far from being unfair, God’s unmerited acts of blessings make life on earth much more bearable than it should be given the pervasive effects of sin on all of his creation.
- Without an understanding of the doctrine of common grace, Christians may think they can live and work self-sufficiently within a “sub-culture” of other believers. We may feel we should only go to Christian doctors, work with Christian lawyers, purchase Christian music, support Christian artists, and so on. Of course, we ought to remember that every non-Christian is operating out of a distorted worldview. But the fact remains that the gifts God has put in the world for believers he has also showered upon non-believers. Mozart was a gift to us, whether he was a believer or not.⁵ Jesus himself said that God “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45).
- Without an understanding of common grace, Christians may feel no need to study the world and other human cultures in order to get to know God. But the fact is that we need to appreciate truth and wisdom wherever we find it and that studying different cultures, languages, artwork, and music expands not only our appreciation of the created world but also the God who made it.
- Without an understanding of common grace, Christians will have trouble understanding why non-Christians so often exceed Christians in morality and wisdom. The differences between believers and nonbelievers are, sadly, often rather hard to discern. One of the reasons, of course, is the common stain of sin. The other reason is the gift of common grace.

5. See the reflections on Mozart from the likes of such heavyweight theologians as Karl Barth, *Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart* (Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2003) and Hans Küng, *Mozart: Traces of Transcendence* (Eerdmans, 1993).

Common grace is therefore a thread that binds us together in our common humanity, as well as a powerful tool in evangelism. If the glory of God is indeed in all the earth as Scripture testifies, the mission of the people of God is to “name the glory”; to name the unknown-known god (Acts 17:23); to speak of the glory that has come down in the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Copyright © 2003 by Timothy Keller, © 2010 by Redeemer City to City. This article is adapted from a leadership training session at Redeemer Presbyterian Church in 2003.

We encourage you to use and share this material freely—but please don't charge money for it, change the wording, or remove the copyright information.