

# Common Grace Is Anything But Common

## Introduction

Many of you watched the PBS series over the past couple of weeks about Country Music. One interesting story is about the hit song “Act Naturally” originally recorded by Buck Owens. When given the opportunity to choose a song to sing to round out one of their albums, Ringo Starr, who was heavily influenced by country music, chose “Act Naturally” because, evidently, he identified personally with the lyrics. The song tells the tale of a man who has been jilted and, because of that, can play a film part of someone sad and lonely without knowing anything about acting:

*They're gonna put me in the movies  
They're gonna make a big star out of me  
We'll make a film about a man that's sad and lonely  
And all I gotta do is act naturally*

OK, so why do I tell you this story?

## Oxymorons

- The term “act naturally” is what’s called an oxymoron. **An oxymoron is defined as a figure of speech containing words that seem to contradict each other.** Actually, if you pay attention to the lyrics, the entire song is oxymoronic. He’s a fool and yet he’ll be a big star. He’ll be wildly popular and yet he’s lonely. He’s acting, yet he’s being his true self.
- Other oxymorons you’ve probably heard:
  - Jumbo shrimp
  - Random order
  - Walking dead
  - Small crowd
  - Sweet sorrow
  - Deafening silence

Well, there’s a term and a concept in theology that is important to understand and yet it’s oxymoronic. It’s what I want to talk about today. The term is “common grace.”

## Common Grace - What Is It?

- Generally speaking, grace is anything God does for His creation. A couple months ago, in the last sermon I preached, I talked about the truth that God created us, but he doesn’t need us. He did not create the universe because he was bored or lonely. His act of creating the world and populating it with creatures, including you and me, was entirely an act of grace. It was a gift, motivated by love, that none of us deserved or were entitled to.

- Now, nothing God does is common. Everything he does is perfect and done with his loving, omniscient oversight in view.
- So what is meant by the term “common grace?”

Matthew 5:43-45

*“You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’ 44 But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 45 so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For **he** makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.*

- Talk about oxymoronic! Loving our enemies!? Praying for our persecutors!? Those are certainly commands that do not seem to make sense.
- God is revealing his character here. His ways are not our ways, but he commands us to become like him. He’s the God who sends sunshine and rain on both the just and the unjust. He wants us to be like him by seeking to express kindness to everyone, even when they don’t deserve it. This is the essence of common grace.

## Two Kinds of Grace

- Perhaps it would help by breaking God’s grace down into two categories most often spoken of or clarified by theologians:
  - **Common grace** is the kind of grace we share with all God’s creatures. We see it when two farmers who live on adjoining properties both receive sunshine and both receive the rain that falls, even though one of the farmers hates God and curses him whenever things don’t go his way.
  - All of God’s gifts *are* gifts...we don’t deserve them. But a blaspheming, God hater (in our eyes) certainly doesn’t deserve rain for his crops, bees to pollenate the flowers on his fruit trees, grass for his cattle, or trees with which to cut lumber to build his barns.
  - Yet, God is gracious. All creatures are the recipients of his goodness and his loving care for his creation.
  - So, finally, here it is...the theological definition of common grace: **Common grace is the grace of God by which he gives people innumerable blessings, in this life, that are not a part of salvation.** It’s common to all people, even to those who will spend eternity in hell because they hated God.
  - Everyone is the recipient of God’s common grace, but only a subset of humans will be recipients of God’s saving grace, which is the other classification of God’s grace.
- **Special grace** is saving grace. We sing about it in the hymn “Amazing Grace.” It’s the kind of grace that is spoken about in Ephesians 2:5: “*Even when we were dead in our trespasses, (God) made us alive together with Christ,*” and this was “*not a result of (our) works, that we should boast.*” Ephesians 2: 5, 9

- We had nothing to do with it. When we were dead in our sins God saved us because he wanted to.
- It's called special grace because it's reserved only for his people, those for whom he chooses to give eternal life.
- Most often, the working of common grace in a person's life leads them to repentance, leading them to a saving relationship with God, through the work of Jesus Christ.
- Not everyone is the recipient of special grace. This truth shouldn't upset us; rather, it should cause the redeemed to fall on our faces and thank him for eternity!!
- The terms "common grace" and "saving grace" are not specifically found in scripture, but the theological truths these terms clarify are woven throughout the Old and New Testaments.

### **God's Word Speaks for Itself:**

Psalm 36:5-12

- 5 Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens,  
your faithfulness to the clouds.*
- 6 Your righteousness is like the mountains of God;  
your judgments are like the great deep;  
man and beast you save, O Lord.*
- 7 How precious is your steadfast love, O God!  
The children of mankind take refuge in the shadow of your wings.*
- 8 They feast on the abundance of your house,  
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.*
- 9 For with you is the fountain of life;  
**in your light do we see light.***
- 10 Oh, continue your steadfast love to those who know you,  
and your righteousness to the upright of heart!*
- 11 Let not the foot of arrogance come upon me,  
nor the hand of the wicked drive me away.*
- 12 There the evildoers lie fallen;  
they are thrust down, unable to rise.*

Psalm 145:5, 15-20

- 5 The LORD is good to all,  
and his mercy is over all that he has made...*
- 15 The eyes of all look to you,  
and you give them their food in due season.*
- 16 You open your hand;  
you satisfy the desire of every living thing.*

17 *The Lord is righteous in all his ways  
and kind in all his works.*

18 *The Lord is near to all who call on him,  
to all who call on him in truth.*

19 *He fulfills the desire of those who fear him;  
he also hears their cry and saves them.*

20 *The Lord preserves all who love him,  
but all the wicked he will destroy.*

### **Aspects of God's Common Grace that Impact Humanity:**

- This grace is extended to all mankind, all over the world. He's given us life. He's given us breath. Common grace is a preserving, sustaining grace. Without it the world would, basically, self-destruct.
- As we read in these verses, God provides sustenance through the innumerable heavenly, geological, mineral, plant, and animal resources he has made available to us.
- Because mankind has been created in his image, he's given us gifts that put us in a special class above other creatures in the plant and animal kingdoms. We have been given a mind with which to reason. We have a will that enables us to make decisions that are more than just stimulus-response reactions. We've been gifted with emotions that allow us to experience and express love, joy, sorrow, and anger.
- Colossians 2:3 Paul makes the profound claim that *"In Christ are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge."* Christ has wisdom and knowledge and he's made it available to humanity. As we read in Psalm 36, "In his light we see light." The powers of intelligence and reason he's given to humans aren't simply instincts like in our animal counterparts. It's why we, as humans can talk about concepts like beauty and justice; it's why we are able to design and create tools that improve our lives; It's why we can make plans with which to set the course of our futures.
- We can conduct experimental research that allows us to discover cures for diseases, and inventions that improve the quality of our lives.
- In God's common grace he has set governmental authority over people groups, in order to restrain evil and punish evildoers, allowing us to live in security. Governments are part of his plan and they are a gift to all people.
- Most importantly, God has gifted all humans with a conscience. In Romans 2:14-15, Paul explains that "the work of the law is written on the hearts" of, not only the Jews who have the law, but even of the Gentiles who have never heard the law. God has placed in the heart of every human an understanding of his moral law.
- This is a gift to all mankind. It's common grace. Even when humans behave badly, we are never as bad as we could be. Without this basic conscientiousness of God's moral standards, life in this world would be impossible. We'd destroy each other and our environment in no time! You say "That's not true! Thieves have no consciousness that stealing is wrong." Oh yeah? Just steal something from a thief and see how he reacts. Or tell a lie to a person who seems to have no conscience about lying and see if he gets angry!

### **But with great privilege comes great responsibility:**

- All the aspects of God's common grace are extended to all men and women, even to those who deny God's existence and his right to ownership over their lives.
- In Romans 1, Paul makes the claim that, because of this common grace that's extended to all mankind, **everyone knows God**. "His invisible attributes, namely his eternal power and divine nature are clearly evident in the things that have been made." Romans 1:20.
- Therefore men and women are "without excuse." They are culpable. They have a responsibility to acknowledge God and to worship him as the all powerful creator.
- On Judgment Day, God will expose the secrets of men's (and women's) hearts. They will be unable to deny the clear evidence, made available to them because of common grace, that he exists, that his standards are evident, and that they have suppressed the truth in unrighteousness.
- Those who reject God's saving grace will spend an eternity in hell.
- (Incidentally, I have a theory about hell. Hell is simply a place where ALL of God's grace is removed. No special grace *and* no common grace. People are left to themselves. How horrible!!)

### **Implications:**

- Common grace allows us to work side by side on important issues with anyone. Even those not claiming to be Christians can have a genuine concern for the poor, a distain for abortion, or a love of liberty. Both Christians and non Christians alike worked to end the scourge of chattel slavery in the United States. Yet it was primarily the Christian church that spearheaded the establishment of common schools, hospitals, orphanages.
- Beyond that, Jesus commanded those of us who are the recipients of his special, saving grace to go forth and make disciples of all nations. Common grace provides us the means to do so. Because of common grace we have a fertile field in which to work. The gifts of common grace provide us with a platform from which to reason with those to whom we are sent. We can appeal to people's consciences. We can point out the majesty of the created order. We can talk about God's love and concern for his creation.
- By implication, those whom God has chosen will respond positively when they hear the words of Jesus contained in the Gospel. The truth will find a home in their hearts. In his trial before Pilate Jesus said "Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." John 18:37. They will say in themselves "Yes, this is the God I've known and longed for! This is the good God who has been so gracious to me!"
- Romans 2:4 - *"God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance."*

### **Closing:**

- He's gifted every human with talents we can use that will benefit humanity, to subdue the earth as he commanded our first parents to do.

- What a privilege to act as Christ's ambassadors to spread his fame throughout the earth! He is the head and we are his body. Each of us has a unique opportunity to extend his grace to our family, friends, neighbors, and co-workers.
- I began my talk today with the lyrics of a song. One hymn we sing fairly often causes us to ponder and thank God for both his common grace and for his special, saving grace.
- Review the words to the hymn "How Great Thou Art."
- Prayer

### **Other Resources:**

"Common Grace," video by R.C. Sproul

<https://youtu.be/1xTyDJdklcA>

"Common Grace," a short video by Kevin DeYoung

<https://youtu.be/Ci7HhInAN4g>

"A Loving Provision," article by R.C. Sproul

<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/articles/loving-provision/>

"Providence And Common Grace," *Tabletalk* Magazine

<https://www.ligonier.org/learn/devotionals/providence-and-common-grace/>