

“What it means to be Reformed”; Session # 30 – Sola Gratia – “Common Grace and the Holy Spirit”, Prepared for the Adult Sunday School class on March 8th, 2015, by Pastor Paul Rendall.

Read Titus 2: 11-14 – “For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men, teaching us to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts, we should live soberly, righteously, and godly in the present age, looking for the blessed hope and glorious appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ, who gave Himself for us, that He might redeem us from every lawless deed and purify for Himself His own special people, zealous for good works.”

Notice in these verses that the grace of God has appeared to all men. How has it appeared to all men? It has appeared in the Incarnation of Christ and His life’s work of righteousness and sufferings and resurrection which was crowned in glory and honor by God the Father. His life’s work was written down by the Apostles and others, and is then found encapsulated in the gospel which preached to all men accompanied by the power and working of the Holy Spirit according to the will of God. When this gospel and Christ Himself are received, a person is saved and then His saving grace then teaches them to live godly. It is common grace that many nations and societies now have this gospel; that they have Bibles that can be obtained, and churches which preach the gospel which can be attended. The Holy Spirit then strives with men, through the means of the preaching and proclamation of the gospel, that people might be saved. We should understand that there are no “mights” with God in His saving work through the Holy Spirit in terms of His eternal purpose and the regeneration of the heart. But there are “mights” in relation to whether people will believe the gospel and be saved, when we think of it from the standpoint of men’s efforts with the gospel.

John 3: 16 – “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.” Notice the language is not the language of election here, but it is the language of the free offer of the gospel to all men, and it assumes their being able to consider the truth of Christ and what He has done for sinners, even though they are dead in their trespasses and sins and unable to do anything spiritually to save themselves. God does not save people apart from the means of the gospel being preached and shared with them. But God strives with all men as to whether they will listen to His word when in is His providential good will, He brings the gospel, or the truths of His word and will, within range of people whom He would have to hear it. Genesis 6: 3 – “And the Lord said, ‘My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, for he is indeed flesh; yet his days shall be one hundred and twenty years.’” This 120 years was the time allotted in Common Grace, that God would strive with the sinners of the Antedeluvian world, through the preaching of Noah. (Hebrews 11: 6,7)

Dr. Charles Hodge in his Systematic Theology defines common grace as “that influence of the Spirit, which in a greater or less measure, is granted to all who hear the truth.” “The Bible therefore teaches that 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 what measure seems good to Him.” “In this sphere also He divides to every man severally as He will.” (1st Corinthians 12: 11) “As God is everywhere present in the material world, guiding its operations according to the laws of nature; so He is everywhere present with the minds of men, as the Spirit of truth and goodness, operating on them according to the law of their free moral agency, inclining them to good and

restraining them from evil.” “The evidence therefore from Scripture, and from experience, is clear that the Holy Spirit is present with every human mind, and enforces, with more or less power, whatever of moral or religious truth the mind may have before it.” “To this presence and influence of the Spirit then, according to Dr. Hodge, we are indebted for all the order, decorum, refinement and virtue, as well as the regard for religion and its ordinances, which exist in the world.” “To it we owe the skill of artisans the courage and strength of heroes, the wisdom of statesmen.”

Professor John Murray in his chapter on Common Grace in the 2nd Volume of his works has a broader definition of Common Grace than Hodge when he says this: “The word ‘common’ in the title of the topic is not used in the sense that each particular favor is given to all without discrimination or distinction, but rather in the sense that favors of varying kinds and degrees are bestowed upon this sin-cursed world, favors real in their character as expressions of the divine goodness but which are not in themselves and of themselves saving in their nature and effect.” “So the term common grace should rather be defined as every favor of whatever kind or degree, falling short of salvation, which this undeserving and sin-cursed world enjoys at the hand of God.”

Common Grace is God’s goodness and kindness which is designed by Him, to lead men to repentance.

Romans 2: 1 – “Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things.” “But we know that the judgment of God is according to truth against those who practice such things.” “And do you think this, O man, you who judge those practicing such things, and doing the same, that you will escape the judgment of God?” “Or do you despise the riches of His goodness, forbearance, and longsuffering, not knowing that the goodness of God leads you to repentance?”

Common Grace shows forth the love and care of God towards his creature man that he would be truly blessed not only in an earthly sense, but in the sense of their finding saving grace through Christ.

Matthew 5: 43-48 - “You have heard that it was said, ‘You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.’” “But I say to you, love your enemies, bless those who curse you, do good to those who hate you, and pray for those who spitefully use you and persecute you, that you may sons of your Father 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.” “For if you love those who love you, what reward have you?” “Do not even the tax collectors do the same?” “And if you greet your brethren only, what do you do more than others?” “Do not even the tax collectors do so?” “Therefore you shall be perfect as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

If the Father in heaven shows this common grace to evil men, then we as Christians should show kindness to them as well. The Father is perfect in His display of common grace. We are to help in this display of human love and kindness, by being so ourselves. This tends as a good witness to every man; a witness that God can use if He so chooses to.

Luke 6: 35 – “But love your enemies, do good, and lend, hoping for nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High.” “For He is kind to the unthankful and evil.” “Therefore be merciful, just as your Father also is merciful.”

Listen to Matthew Henry – “It will redound to our honor; for herein we shall resemble God in his goodness, which is the greatest glory: “Ye shall be the children of the Highest, shall be owned by him as his children, being like him.” It is the glory of God that he is kind to the unthankful and to the evil, bestows the gifts of common providence even upon the worst of men, who are every day provoking him, and rebelling against him, and using those very gifts to his dishonor.”

Christ, in deep sincerity and in tears, said in Luke 13 : 34:

“O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killest the prophets, and stonest them that are sent unto thee; how often would I have gathered thy children together, as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, but you were not willing.”

Luke 19 : 41. – “Now as He drew near, He saw the city and wept over it, saying, ‘If you had known, even you, especially in this your day, the things that make for your peace!’ “But now they are hidden from your eyes.” We need to see here that the Lord Jesus is weeping over the non-elect whom God did not choose in election. Why? Because He had a sincere desire that they would have recognized the day of their visitation.

Listen to the Puritan John Howe on Common Grace: “Could you think the gospel was to bring you to faith and repentance, whether you heard it or not?” “Or (whether you) ever apply your mind to consider the meaning of it, and what it did propose and offer to you?” “Or when you might so easily understand that the grace of God was necessary to make it effectual to you, and that it might become His power (or the instrument of His power) to your salvation, could you think it concerned you not to sue and supplicate to Him for that grace, when your life lay upon it, and your eternal hope?” “Have you lay weltering (wallowing) at the footstool of the throne of grace in in your own tears (as you were formerly weltering in your sins and impurities), crying for grace to help you in this time of your need?” “And if you think this was above you and outside your compass, have you done all that was within your compass in order to the obtaining of grace at God’s hands?” “But here perhaps, you will inquire: Is there anything, then to be done by us, whereupon the grace of God may be expected certainly to follow?” “To which I answer:

1st – That it is out of *the* question *that* nothing can be done by us to deserve it, or for which we may expect it to follow.” “It were not grace if we had obliged, or brought it, by our desert, under former preventive bonds to us.” “And –

2nd – “What if nothing can be done by us upon which it may be certainly expected to follow?” “Is a certainty of perishing better than a high probability of being saved?”

3rd – “Such as live under the gospel have reason to apprehend it highly probable that they may obtain that grace which is necessary to their salvation, if they be not wanting to themselves.” (that is – acting irresponsibly and neglecting to consider and believe the gospel) “For,

4th – “There is generally afforded to such, that which is wont to be called common grace.” “I speak not of any further extent of it, ‘tis enough to our present purpose that it extends so far, as to them that live under the gospel, and have thereby a day allowed them wherein to provide for their peace.” “Now, though this grace is not yet certainly saving, yet it tends to that which is so.” “And none have cause to despair, but that being duly improved and complied with, it may end in it. Taken from His sermon – “The Redeemer’s Tears wept over Lost Souls”.

W.G.T. Shedd says: “He unquestionably desired that the inhabitants of Jerusalem would yield to that degree of common grace with which they had been blest, and would repent and believe on him ; and he unquestionably could have exerted upon them that degree of uncommon grace, by which he is “the author and finisher of faith”, Heb. 12 : 2; and by which he demonstrates that “all power is given unto him in heaven and in earth,” Matt. 28: 18. Yet he did not exert his power to overcome the obstinacy and resistance of the human will in this instance. Those inhabitants of Jerusalem over whom he had wept were passed by in the bestowment of regenerating grace, but not of common.”

W.G.T. Shedd says again:

It is in respect to the bestowment of this higher degree of grace, that St. Paul affirms that God “hath mercy on whom he will have mercy, and whom he will he hardeneth”[i.e. does not soften].

“It is,” says William Bates says (Eternal Judgment, II.), “from the perverseness of the will and the love of sin, that men do not obey the gospel. For the Holy Spirit never withdraws his gracious assistance, till resisted, grieved, and quenched by them. It will be no excuse, that Divine grace is not conferred in the same eminent degree upon some as upon others that are converted; for the impenitent shall not be condemned for want of that singular powerful grace that was the privilege of the elect, but for receiving in vain that measure of common grace that they had. If he that received one talent had faithfully improved it, he had been rewarded with more; but upon the slothful and ungrateful neglect of his duty, he was justly deprived of it, and cast into a dungeon of horror, the emblem of hell. “Reprobated persons are striven with by the Holy Spirit, and are convicted of sin, but they resist these strivings, and the Holy Spirit proceeds no further with them. In his sovereignty, he decides not to overcome their resistance of common grace. The non-elect are the subjects of common grace, to which they oppose a strenuous and successful determination of their own will. Every sinner is stronger than common grace, but not stronger than regenerating grace. The non-elect “may be and often are outwardly called by the ministry of the word, and have some common operations of the Spirit, who for their willful neglect and contempt of the grace offered to them, being justly left in their unbelief, do never truly come to Jesus Christ.” Westminster S. C., 68. Isa. 6 : 9, 10, Go and tell this people, Hear ye indeed, but perceive not. Make the heart of this people fat, and make their ears heavy, and shut their eyes; lest they see with their eyes, and hear with their ears, and understand with their heart, and convert and be healed.” The resistance and abuse of common grace is followed by desertion of God; which negative desertion is, in this passage of the evangelical prophet, called, Hebraistically, a positive stupefying, hardening and deafening.

Preterition is not inconsistent with the doctrine of the Divine mercy.

A man who has had common grace has been the subject of mercy to this degree. If he resists it, he cannot complain because God does not bestow upon him still greater mercy, in the form of regenerating grace. A sinner who has quenched the convicting influence of the Holy Spirit cannot call God unmerciful, because he does not afterwards grant him the converting influence. A beggar who contemptuously rejects the five dollars offered by a benevolent man cannot charge stinginess upon him, because, after this rejection of the five dollars, he does not give him ten. A sinner who has repulsed the mercy of God in common grace, and demands that God grant a yet larger degree, virtually says to the Infinite One : “Thou hast tried once to convert me from sin ; now try again, and try harder.”

