Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

The Universal Grace of God
Scripture: Romans 3:10-18; Acts 17:28
Code: QA194

In whatsense is God's love universal? What aspects of God's love and goodwill are seen even in His dealings with the reprobate?

There are at least four ways that God's love is manifest universally to all people. Today we will consider the first.

Common Grace

*Common grace*is a term theologians use to describe the goodness of God to all mankind universally. Common grace restrains sin and the effects of sin on the human race. Common grace is what keeps humanity from descending into the morass of evil that we would see if the full expression of our fallen nature were allowed to have free reign.

Scripture teaches that we are totally depraved—tainted with sin in every aspect of our being (Rom. 3:10–18). People who doubt this doctrine often ask, "How can people who are supposedly totally depraved enjoy beauty, have a sense of right and wrong, know the pangs of a wounded conscience, or produce great works of art and literature? Aren't these accomplishments of humanity proof that the human race is essentially good? Don't these things testify to the basic goodness of human nature?"

And the answer is no. Human nature is utterly corrupt. "There is none righteous, not even one" (Rom. 3:10). "The heart is more deceitful than all else and is desperately sick" (Jer. 17:9). Unregenerate men and women are "dead in … trespasses and sins" (Eph. 2:1). All people are by nature "foolish … disobedient, deceived, enslaved to various lusts and pleasures, spending [their lives] in malice" (Titus 3:3). This is true of all alike, "For all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Rom. 3:23).

Common grace is all that restrains the full expression of human sinfulness. God has graciously given us a conscience, which enables us to know the difference between right and wrong, and to some degree places moral constraints on evil behavior (Rom. 2:15). He sovereignly maintains order in human society through government (Rom. 13:1–5). He enables us to admire beauty and goodness (Ps. 50:2). He imparts numerous advantages, blessings, and tokens of His kindness on boththe righteous and the unrighteous (Matt. 5:45). All of those things are the result of common grace, God's goodness to mankind in general.

Common grace *ought* to be enough to move sinners to repentance. The apostle Paul rebukes the unbeliever: “Do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?” (Rom. 2:4). Yet because of the depth of depravity in the human heart, all sinners spurn the goodness of God.

Common grace does not pardon sin or redeem sinners, but it is nevertheless a sincere token of God’s goodwill to mankind in general. As the apostle Paul said, “In Him we live and move and exist … for we also are His offspring” (Acts 17:28). That takes in everyone on earth, not just those whom God adopts as sons. God deals with us all as His offspring, people made in His image. “The Lord is good to all, and His mercies are over all His works” (Ps. 145:9).

If you question the love and goodness of God to all, look again at the world in which we live. Someone might say, “There’s a lot of sorrow in this world.” The only reason the sorrow and tragedy stand out is because there is also much joy and gladness. The only reason we recognize the ugliness is that God has given us so much beauty. The only reason we feel the disappointment is that there is so much that satisfies.

When we understand that all of humanity is fallen and rebellious and unworthy of any blessing from God’s hand, it helps give a better perspective. “Because of the Lord’s great love we are not consumed, for His compassions never fail” (Lam. 3:22, NIV). And the only reason God ever gives us anything to laugh at, smile at, or enjoy is because He is a good and loving God. If He were not, we would be immediately consumed by His wrath.

Acts 14 contains a helpful description of common grace. Here Paul and Barnabas were ministering at Lystra, when Paul healed a lame man. The crowds saw it and someone began saying that Paul was Zeus and Barnabas was Hermes. The priest at the local temple of Zeus wanted to organize a sacrifice to Zeus. But when Paul and Barnabas heard about it, they said,

Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you, and preach the gospel to you in order that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them. *And in the generations gone by He permitted all the nations to go their own ways; and yet He did not leave Himself without witness, in that He did good and gave you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness* (vv. 15–17, emphasis added).

That is a fine description of common grace. While allowing sinners to “go their own ways,” God nevertheless bestows on them temporal tokens of His goodness and lovingkindness. It is not saving grace. It has no redemptive effect. Nevertheless, it is a genuine and unfeigned manifestation of divine lovingkindness to all people.

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