

When the World Seems Fine without God

The Problem of Good

Edited by D. Marion Clark



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P U B L I S H I N G
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To my three greatest common grace blessings:
my wife, Ginger, and daughters, Sarah and Jean.

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Foreword

Philip G. Ryken

THE “PROBLEM OF EVIL” poses a serious challenge to faith, and it has occupied the minds of the best thinkers and theologians for millennia—at least since the time of Job. If God is good, then why do bad things happen in his good creation, including the bad things that happen to good people?

This is a difficult question, to be sure. What is not always recognized, however, is that the “problem of good” is every bit as challenging for people who do not believe in God or are unsure what to believe. If there is no God, then the material universe is the only ultimate reality. There is no soul; there is only matter. In that case, how can we explain the transcendent joy that rises in the human heart when a mother caresses her baby’s cheek, or when an orchestra plays the triumphant chords at the climax of a Beethoven symphony, or when a red dawn breaks over the far horizon, or when lovers are reunited after being separated by war? Are wonder and awe spiritual realities, or are they nothing more than chemical reactions in the brain? Apart from the existence of God, what basis do we have for saying that some things are truly good?

Christians face a different struggle with good (and evil). It is easy enough for us to explain the existence of good: it is a gift from God. We may even be able to begin to explain the existence of evil: it is the consequence of sin. But still we struggle to explain why good things happen to bad people. We live in a moral universe, in which sin brings people under the judgment of a holy God. So why do so many sinners—including people

who reject God outright—receive so many divine blessings? And why does God allow so many good things to happen in the world through the actions of people who do not serve him as well as through people who do?

The biblical doctrine that helps us answer these complex questions is “common grace”—common in the sense that it is universal. God has not given all his gifts or all his grace only to Christians. On the contrary, “The LORD is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made” (Ps. 145:9). Or again, “Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above” (James 1:17). This evidently includes the gifts that God gives to people who do not claim to follow Christ as well as to the people who do follow Christ. As James Davison Hunter wrote in his influential book *To Change the World*, “People of every creed and no creed have talents and abilities, possess knowledge, wisdom, and inventiveness, and hold standards of goodness, truth, justice, morality, and beauty that are, in relative degree, in harmony with God’s will and purposes.”¹

This means that God accomplishes his gracious purpose in the world through non-Christians as well as Christians. Their work can bring glory to God, even when that is not their explicit intent. So a man like Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (who at least for most of his life was not a practicing Christian) brought as much glory to God through his music as a man like Johann Sebastian Bach (who signed many of his compositions with the letters “sDg,” meaning “to God alone be the glory”). This is not to deny the profound difference between the heart motivation of a writer or composer who wants to honor God and the heart motivation of a person who doesn’t. Their motivations may well affect the quality of their work in tangible as well as intangible ways. And yet, by the grace of God, the gifts of the unbeliever still honor the God who gave them.

Admittedly, common grace is not saving grace, and the blessings that come with creation fall short of full redemption—they will not bring anyone into eternal life. Common

grace relates to life in the present world, with or without a loving relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Only saving grace brings people into a personal friendship with the living God that lasts forever. Thus it is important to recognize the limitations as well as the implications of common grace.

These principles are not nearly as well understood as they ought to be. Theologians have done comparatively little work in analyzing and explaining the doctrine of common grace. And many lay people are unfamiliar with the doctrine at all, despite its profound relevance for daily life.

We may all be grateful, therefore, that Marion Clark and his friends from ministry and other walks of life have written this book. Pastor Clark has dedicated his life to explaining biblical truth in clear, practical ways and to solving spiritual problems in the life of the church. He does all of that here in *The Problem of Good*. There is no other book like it—nothing that offers a basic overview and complete introduction to the doctrine of common grace. As a result, people who read this book will be uncommonly prepared to think through complex problems and to live out their faith in the church and in the world.

Acknowledgments

THE SEED FOR THIS BOOK PROJECT was planted when I asked Phil Ryken (at that time Senior Minister of Tenth Presbyterian Church) to recommend a book on common grace for my summer reading. Surprisingly, he was stymied. We agreed that someone ought to write such a book. A number of years later a sabbatical gave me opportunity for further study and the planning of this book. Thanks go to Lydia Brownback for the suggestion of a collaboration with other writers. I am thankful for all the contributors, who understood the significance of the subject and were willing to use their talents for such a work. The editors at P&R grasped the concept of what I wanted to accomplish and have guided an idea to production.

Readers wanting to read further will find resources in the endnotes, but several works were most helpful to me. There is the three-volume work on common grace by the Dutch theologian Abraham Kuyper. His *Common Grace*¹ is the one comprehensive treatment of the doctrine, but it has not been available in English. A translation project is underway and the full work should be completed in the near future. I benefited from the initial offering of that project, *Wisdom and Wonder: Common Grace in Science and Art*.² All theologians addressing the subject subsequently had to interact with Kuyper. Of those writers, I have been helped by Herman Bavinck's "Calvin and Common Grace,"³ Cornelius Van Til's *Common Grace and the Gospel*,⁴ and John Murray's "Common Grace" from *Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol. 2: Systematic Theology*.⁵

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Social commentator Ken Myers of Mars Hill Audio wrote a helpful piece entitled “Christianity, Culture, and Common Grace.”⁶ Richard Mouw published a helpful book called *He Shines in All That’s Fair: Culture and Common Grace*.⁷ He expressed hope of reviving discussion of the doctrine. *The Problem of Good* is a modest attempt to do the same.

| Introduction |

The Problem of Good

D. Marion Clark

THE PROBLEM OF GOOD for many Christians is twofold. The first is how to make sense of the “good” found in the unregenerate. Consider this poem.

She walks in beauty, like the night
Of cloudless climes and starry skies;
And all that's best of dark and bright
Meet in her aspect and her eyes:
Thus mellowed to that tender light
Which heaven to gaudy day denies.

One shade the more, one ray the less,
Had half impaired the nameless grace
Which waves in every raven tress,
Or softly lightens o'er her face;
Where thoughts serenely sweet express
How pure, how dear, their dwelling-place.

And on that cheek, and o'er that brow,
So soft, so calm, yet eloquent,
The smiles that win, the tints that glow,
But tell of days in goodness spent,
A mind at peace with all below,
A heart whose love is innocent!¹

This beautiful, tender poem was written by a man whose character provided the model for Count Dracula. He was described by one woman as “mad, bad, and dangerous to know,” an accurate description that both women and men would learn after his seductions. He was Lord Byron. How did such a cad write so beautiful a poem, one that captures inner moral beauty?

Or take another example, this time of a great tune composer and arranger of hymns. One of the best-regarded hymns is “For All the Saints.” The words are moving.

But lo! there breaks a yet more glorious day;
The saints triumphant rise in bright array;
The King of Glory passes on his way.
Alleluia! Alleluia!

From earth’s wide bounds, from ocean’s farthest coast,
Through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,
Singing to Father, Son, and Holy Ghost,
Alleluia! Alleluia!²

They are all the more moving when sung to the tune “Sine Nomine,” composed by Ralph Vaughan Williams, notable for his church music. And yet Williams did not believe in this King of Glory. He was an agnostic if not an atheist. How could a composer whose heart was not bent toward the King of Glory produce music that leads the King’s disciples into moving worship?

This is the problem of good. We live in a world that is at odds with its Creator and whose human creatures are in rebellion against their Ruler, and yet this same world has produced beautiful, truth-filled writings, music, and concepts that have enriched our appreciation of and devotion to the Creator and Ruler whom we do acknowledge, serve, and worship. How can this be? How can unregenerate men and women understand so much about the God they deny, or use their gifts to express truth about him? How can persons who are “darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of the igno-

rance that is in them, due to their hardness of heart” (Eph. 4:18) nevertheless discover, contemplate, teach, express, and produce works that exemplify truth, beauty, and insight about God, his creation, his works, and even his redemptive work?

Or perhaps more perplexing and troubling, how can unregenerate individuals whose hearts of stone have not been replaced with hearts of flesh by the Holy Spirit (see Ezek. 36:26) still live moral, compassionate lives that are similar, if not superior, to those of regenerate followers of Christ? All of us who follow Christ can point to some neighbor who seems to be naturally hospitable, loving, even devoted to worshiping God, but who does not know God in Christ. How can this be? Scripture says this about the unregenerate:

None is righteous, no, not one;
 no one understands;
 no one seeks for God.
 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless;
 no one does good,
 not even one. (Rom. 3:10–12)

But we can see good in most of our unregenerate neighbors, and there are neighbors who outdo us in doing good. How can that be?

This—the good, truth, and beauty that confront us from our unregenerate neighbors of the rebellious world—is what shakes the faith of many Christians even more than the problem of evil. The fall of Adam and Eve teaches us to understand that the world is filled with evil and that bad things will happen even to regenerate followers of Christ. Bad stuff happens. But why does good stuff happen, not merely *to* the unregenerate but even *through* them?

How necessary is the gospel to make bad people good? How necessary is the regenerating work of the Holy Spirit to bring light and truth into the human heart? And if a measure of good and truth can be acknowledged to exist in the unregenerate,

then we are led eventually to ask the next question: how can God justly deny them entry into his heavenly kingdom, much less condemn them to hell?

It is this train of thought that has led some Christians to compromise the gospel faith, if not to abandon it altogether. Grappling with the problem of good challenges, in particular, Christians who have grown up immersed in Christian culture. They have been raised in Christian homes, attended Christian schools, and worshiped in biblically based churches. Then they go off to a secular college or join the secular workforce or in some other way come into real-life contact with the so-called pagan world. Prepared for the evil in the world, they are tripped up by the good they find. Instead of darkened minds, they find minds that seem more enlightened than theirs; instead of calloused hearts, they find warm hearts; instead of self-centered egos, they find people devoted to justice and serving the needy. And none of these people follow Christ, unless it's in a way that regards him as a moral teacher.

Are we Christians, then, the ones who got it all wrong? Were we taught wrong by our churches and teachers? Is the gospel wrong, or were we maybe taught a defective view of the gospel? What if the story of the prodigal son was not the right perspective? What if the elder brother had visited his younger brother and found that his brother was actually doing well and living among good, though pagan, neighbors?

That is problem one. Then there is problem two: can Christians benefit from the contributions of the unregenerate, and if so, how? We have no difficulty accepting the contributions of unbelieving engineers, doctors, and plumbers. What do we do with unbelieving philosophers, sociologists, and psychologists? What do we do with the intellectual contributions in all fields? A suspicion of the unregenerate has led many Christians to a self-quarantine from the world and their neighbors, fearful that contact will infect their minds and souls with what is false and immoral. Indeed, the suspicion

leads them to reject almost everything that the unregenerate present, presuming that nothing they see and present can be in keeping with Scripture.

This may be a valid concern, but the perspective presumes that God cannot and will not work in and through his creatures unless they are redeemed. Is it true that God can operate only through the redeemed? Calvin reflected on this subject in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*:

Whenever we come upon these matters in secular writers, 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. For by holding the gifts of the Spirit in slight esteem, we condemn and reproach the Spirit himself. What then? Shall we deny that the truth shone upon the ancient jurists who established civic order and discipline with such great equity? Shall we say that the philosophers were blind in their fine observation and artful description of nature? Shall we say that those men were devoid of understanding who conceived the art of disputation and taught us to speak reasonably? Shall we say that they are insane who developed medicine, devoting their labor to our benefit? What shall we say of all the mathematical sciences? Shall we consider them the ravings of madmen? No, we cannot read the writings of the ancients on these subjects without great admiration. We marvel at them because we are compelled to recognize how preeminent they are. But shall we count anything praiseworthy or noble without recognizing at the same time that it comes from God? Let us be ashamed of such ingratitude, into which not even the pagan poets fell, for they confessed that the gods had invented philosophy, laws, and all useful arts. Those men whom Scripture [1 Cor. 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.³

As Calvin noted, it is irrefutable that the unregenerate mind is “clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts.” Even so, Calvin also notes limits to such a mind.

But lest anyone think a man truly blessed when he is credited with possessing great power to comprehend truth under the elements of this world [cf. Col. 2:8], we should at once add that all this capacity to understand, with the understanding that follows upon it, is an unstable and transitory thing in God’s sight, when a solid foundation of truth does not underlie it.⁴

So then, what may we trust that comes from the intellect of the unregenerate mind? What may we enjoy that comes from the creativity and skill of the defiled heart? May we or may we not borrow from and even take delight in the unregenerate world?

This book addresses both of those problems through an explication of the doctrine of common grace. The doctrine is often cited in fleeting reference but is rarely expounded. When understood, it is the key that opens the door to much understanding. How do we regard our neighbors? How should we be involved in the world? Common grace explains. And it adds to our ability to worship and serve God in ways that we may not have given thought to.

What is common grace? John Murray gives the most succinct definition: “Every favor of whatever kind or degree, falling short of salvation, which this undeserving and sin-cursed world enjoys at the hand of God.”⁵ As Jesus put it, God the Father “makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust” (Matt. 5:45).

Why would God show such favor and give good gifts to the evil and the unjust? In his Sermon on the Mount message, from which the above verse is taken, Jesus introduces the idea in the context of loving one’s enemy. He presents his Father as the

model for such love, which is displayed through these common grace gifts. In Luke's gospel, Jesus specifically says that God is "kind to the ungrateful and the evil" and that we are to be so merciful "even as your Father is merciful" (Luke 6:35–36).

The remainder of this book will present a fuller definition and application of common grace. The first two chapters present the biblical teaching about the doctrine, specifically its role in restraining sin and in bestowing good gifts. Steven Lawson will address the ways in which God restrains sin, the decay of his image, and evil as well as how God restrains his own wrath. Sean Lucas then explains how God does not merely restrain sin in man but induces a measure of good so that men and women act with a conscience, abide by a code of conduct, and even love their neighbors. He also demonstrates how God bestows good gifts outwardly—the blessings of the natural world—and inwardly—the blessings of intellect and creativity.

We will then consider the application of common grace. How should an understanding of common grace affect the way we worship and live out our faith before the world? I will address specifically how the knowledge of common grace impacts our worship. John Leonard then explores how an understanding of common grace influences the way we witness for the gospel. And Ruth Floyd considers what common grace has to say to us about loving our neighbors.

What then does the doctrine teach us about living in the world? David Skeel deliberates that specific question. Must we operate in the world only with the motive to redeem our neighbors and our culture, or does common grace reset the paradigm? Gene Veith will tackle the perplexing issue of how we may learn from the world. What does common grace have to teach us about how to learn and whom we may learn from? Paul Tripp takes the issue a step further: may Christians not only live in the world but actually take pleasure in it?

Perhaps the most troubling matter of all is reconciling the idea of good unregenerate persons being condemned to hell.

How can we believe in hell or in a God who sends good people to hell? I will tackle that difficult emotional issue.

I trust that the reader will gain insight into the questions and issues raised in this introduction. Hopefully what has been puzzling, or even troubling, about the problem of good will make sense. But I also have an added agenda: to leave many readers dissatisfied with a mere introduction to the doctrine of grace. The contributing writers and I are touching on the doctrine and on the issues it speaks to. For all that is said, more is left unsaid. A comprehensive treatment of common grace will delve more extensively, for example, into the doctrine of providence. Our topics are limited to applications for individuals, but common grace has much to say about the function of the church and about its mission and relation to culture. My hope is for theologians and other writers to recognize the significance of this undertaught doctrine for strengthening the faith of Christ's followers and increasing their adoration of their Maker.

So may the reader enjoy and remain not quite satisfied, which I suppose is the case when we explore all the doctrines concerning God and his ways. He is endless joy and endless mystery. The more we delve into his mysteries, the more we are filled with awe. The more of him we take in, the more we desire to possess. What may have begun as a troubling problem to figure out becomes a doorway into more wondrous complexities—complexities that, instead of troubling us, fill us with joyful wonder.

For Discussion

1. Do you know of anyone whose faith has been tested or even abandoned because they were unable to reconcile the problem of good unregenerate people not being saved?
2. Is this problem of good the reason many young people leave the faith in college, where they find intelligent, reasonable teachers and fellow students?

3. Have you been puzzled by how some people can defy God and nevertheless produce works of beauty and even insight?
4. Have you wondered at times how good unregenerate people whom you know can be loving, compassionate, and moral?
5. Have you been troubled with the thought of how a good God could condemn them to hell?
6. Which of the following chapters intrigues you the most? Why?

PART ONE

**An Exposition
of the Doctrine of
Common Grace**

Restraining Sin and Wrath

Steven J. Lawson

THE DOCTRINE OF *TOTAL DEPRAVITY*, which states that unconverted people are entirely plagued by sin, begs certain questions to be asked: Why are the unrepentant not as evil as they could be? Why are those who are dead in trespasses and sins not fully immersed in a life of complete iniquity? And why is society not more perverse than it is?

These questions raise another set of questions: Why does God allow unbelievers to continue to live? Did not God say that in the day man sins, he will surely die? Yet people do not immediately die after their first sin. Why does God not strike down every transgressor the very moment they break the Law?

Admittedly these are challenging questions that deserve careful thought. More importantly, they demand biblical answers. Mere philosophical speculations will not suffice. The issue is what God himself says in his inspired Word.

The answers to these thought-provoking questions concern a theological teaching in Scripture known as the doctrine of common grace. This truth expounds the fact that God's goodness is extended to all, even to unbelievers. Though the term *common grace* is not found in the Bible, its teaching most certainly is. By way of comparison, the same could be said of the doctrine of the Trinity. Although this word is not used in

Scripture, this biblical truth is clearly set forth throughout its pages. So it is with common grace.

In this chapter our investigation of common grace will address God's universal kindness in restraining sin in the lives of unbelievers. Divine mercy holds back the unbelieving world from degenerating into a more corrupt depravity. By his common goodness, God refrains unregenerate people from becoming as wicked as they could possibly be. In his divine benevolence, he prevents further moral decay of the sinner and of society.

What is more, God temporarily withholds his just wrath from sinners. In so doing he chooses not to inflict immediate vengeance upon this world. Divine mercy stays the instant execution of his death sentence. Both of these spiritual realities—restraining man's sin and restraining God's wrath—will be the focus of this chapter.

God's Restraint of Sin

In Scripture there are numerous passages that teach of the divine restraint of sin in the lives of unbelievers. Such a gracious hindrance by God prevents mankind from plunging deeper into a life of iniquity. The biblical testimony of this truth will be set forth under the following ten headings, each one drawn from both the Old and New Testaments. We will approach them consecutively as they appear in the biblical record.

Sin Restrained by God's Spirit

First, sin is restrained in the lives of unbelievers by the ministry of the Holy Spirit. In the days before the flood God's Spirit held back the unregenerate from a full pursuit of wickedness. The book of Genesis states,

When man began to multiply on the face of the land and daughters were born to them, the sons of God saw that the daughters of man were attractive. And they took as their wives

any they chose. Then the LORD said, “My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years.” (Gen. 6:1–3)

This passage states that as the human race increased in number, illicit sexual acts were committed between the daughters of men and the sons of God. This likely refers to the ungodly daughters of Cain cohabitating with the godly line of Seth.¹ These grievous acts were carried out despite the resistance of the Holy Spirit. By this, God was holding them back from the full practice of their evil passions. Ultimately there came a point at which God withdrew the restraining influence of his Spirit, turning this generation over to their own sinful lusts.

So it is in this present hour. There remains the ongoing ministry of the Holy Spirit, who strives with unconverted men in order to restrain them from being as sinful as their immoral imaginations would lead them to be. This is a general restraint upon their lives, impeding them from being fully engrossed in their sins. This work of the Spirit does not necessarily bring about the regeneration of sinful men, only their restraint in sin.

Sin Restrained by Capital Punishment

Second, sin is restrained in society by the establishment of capital punishment. After the flood in the days of Noah, God sought to protect human life in the face of man’s gross violence against fellow human beings. Consequently, God instituted the practice of capital punishment as a restraint against such sinful acts of aggression. “Whoever sheds the blood of man, by man shall his blood be shed, for God made man in his own image”(Gen. 9:6).

Following the flood, God established the basic principle of equitable justice that the punishment must fit the crime. If anyone deliberately takes the life of another person, the life of the evil aggressor must be taken. This presupposes that the person charged is justly tried and found guilty and that the death

penalty is executed by established authorities. Such retribution was established by God to restrain evil men from committing further acts of murder. This was an act of common grace intended for the protection and preservation of human life.

The same is true today. Civil laws requiring the death penalty in the case of homicide are an extension of God's common grace. Established by the government, these laws serve to restrain the evil acts of sinful men. By this retribution all citizens are hindered in their pursuit of evil. But if these laws are removed, the restraining grace of God is likewise withdrawn.

Sin Restrained by Divine Providence

Third, sin is restrained by divine intervention in the affairs of men. In the days of Abraham, God restrained the unconverted king of Gerar, Abimelech, from the sin that he intended to do against Sarah. God hindered the king from fulfilling the lustful intentions of his depraved heart. He said to Abimelech, "It was I who kept you from sinning against me. Therefore I did not let you touch her" (Gen. 20:6).

Because God providentially prevented Abimelech from lying with Sarah, the king was kept from committing adultery. If God had not intervened, Abimelech could have also fathered a child by Sarah. Although the Bible doesn't give an explicit explanation of how God restrained the king from pursuing his lustful intention, God did restrain the sin of this unconverted man in an act of common grace.

This same preventative providence is active today as the Holy Spirit hinders evil people from committing sinful acts. This general mercy of God often holds back those controlled by lustful passions from spiraling downward into yet deeper moral filth. For example, there may be the providential cancellation of an airplane flight that prevents an individual from traveling to pursue an adulterous affair. This divine mercy may present itself through the loss of a job, which then restrains someone from having the purchasing power to participate in gross sin.

It may be that one's lustful intentions are discovered by another person, forcing the sin to be abandoned. Countless other scenarios can be described in which God providentially restrains evil men from the pursuit of their sin.

Sin Restrained by Limiting Satan

Fourth, sin is restrained by God's sovereign control over Satan. The Devil is a finite being, limited by divine authority. The evil one can attack individuals only to the extent that God allows. In the days of Job, God restricted Satan and the evil that he purposed to do. God and Satan had the following exchange concerning Job:

And the LORD said to Satan, "Have you considered my servant Job, that there is none like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man, who fears God and turns away from evil?" Then Satan answered the LORD and said, "Does Job fear God for no reason? Have you not put a hedge around him and his house and all that he has, on every side? You have blessed the work of his hands, and his possessions have increased in the land. But stretch out your hand and touch all that he has, and he will curse you to your face." And the LORD said to Satan, "Behold, all that he has is in your hand. Only against him do not stretch out your hand." So Satan went out from the presence of the LORD. (Job 1:8–12)

By his own sovereign prerogative, God initiated this conversation with Satan that led to Job being tested in the furnace of affliction. With sinister design, the Devil attempted to turn Job against God. But God set the boundaries for the Devil's intended fury. The serpent of old could bring against the protagonist Job only a tribulation that was divinely limited.

To this hour, Satan continuously seeks to tempt and lure people into sin. Scripture testifies, "Your adversary the devil prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour" (1 Peter 5:8). But the enemy is restrained by God to act only as

far as God permits and no further. All the evil attacks of Satan are under the complete control of God. Though these acts are evil in themselves, God overrules them for good. What is true of believers is also true of unbelievers. By common grace Satan is restrained in his attacks against those made in God's image.

Sin Restrained by Godly Lives

Fifth, Jesus Christ taught that sin is restrained in an evil world by the preserving influence of believers. Christians are to have a powerful influence in this world, much like salt acts as a preservative agent. Speaking to his disciples, Jesus asserted, "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet" (Matt. 5:13). Jesus makes the point that his disciples are like salt in the world. Salt is a preservative that retards spoilage and withholds corruption. So it is that all followers of Christ are a preservative influence in this world, slowing down moral decay and spiritual spoilage. Their godly character acts as a purifying power that restrains the wasting away of the world.

Concerning this truth, the apostle Paul added, "Let your speech always be gracious, seasoned with salt, so that you may know how you ought to answer each person" (Col. 4:6). This is to say that a believer's speech should act as a purifying influence in the world. As Christians carry on their daily conversations, they expose sin in the world. This has a restraining effect upon unbelievers as they pursue their sinful practices. As Christ's disciples bear witness of God, they exert a moral restraint, causing evil men's participation in sin to be suppressed.

This is yet another example of common grace as God strategically places believers as restraining agents in the world. By this divine benevolence unbelievers are held back in their lustful desires for sin through the preserving influence of Christ's disciples.

Sin Restrained by Family Relationships

Sixth, Scripture indicates that sin is divinely restrained through a love that God implants within family relationships. Jesus taught this when he reasoned,

Or which one of you, if his son asks him for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a serpent? If you then, who are evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him! (Matt. 7:9–11)

By this our Lord affirms that even evil men possess a general love for their own family members that restrains them in pursuing sin. An evil father will not give a stone or a snake to his children. This verse implies that what restrains him from practicing more evil is the general benevolence extended to his sons and daughters. To this point it can be further added that love restrains his evil passions toward his wife and, no doubt, toward parents and other family members. This general compassion is surely implanted within men by God himself.

Such a restraining principle is clearly evidenced today. Many unconverted people are restrained in their pursuit of sin by their love for their spouses, children, and extended family members. These relationships often restrain the unregenerate from further participation in their sins. For example, an unsaved husband is sometimes prevented from plunging into adultery or drunkenness by his respect for his spouse and his desire not to shame his children. Many unsaved fathers have sought to be a good example for their children and, in so doing, have been curtailed from habitual sins.

Such family devotion is a divinely bestowed common grace that has even prompted many couples to attend church for the good of their marriages and their children. This desire for the good of loved ones has proved to be a restraining influence in many unconverted lives.

Sin Restrained by Divine Knowledge

Seventh, the apostle Paul implies that the truth about God revealed in creation acts as a restraining influence in the lives of unbelievers. But when this knowledge of God is rejected, he removes these moral restraints. Paul states,

For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse. For although they knew God, they did not honor him as God or give thanks to him, but they became futile in their thinking, and their foolish hearts were darkened. . . .

Therefore God gave them up in the lusts of their hearts to impurity, to the dishonoring of their bodies among themselves. . . .

For this reason God gave them up to dishonorable passions. For their women exchanged natural relations for those that are contrary to nature; and the men likewise gave up natural relations with women and were consumed with passion for one another, men committing shameless acts with men and receiving in themselves the due penalty for their error.

And since they did not see fit to acknowledge God, God gave them up to a debased mind to do what ought not to be done. (Rom. 1:20–21, 24, 26–28)

All creation bears unmistakable witness to the existence and attributes of God. This belief in the reality and being of God serves as a restraint to man's sin. This sense of accountability to the Creator suppresses the evil acts of man to some degree. A restraining influence is placed upon the lustful impulses of unbelievers through their inward sense of God. This general revelation about God in creation places some limitation on their pursuit of iniquity in this fallen world.

But when this divine knowledge is rejected, God sovereignly gives them over to their own degrading passions. The moral

restraint that comes from the knowledge of God is removed as the sinner plunges deeper into idolatry. At some point the God-rejecter is completely abandoned by God. The result is that the sinner runs headlong into sexual perversions and unnatural affections that, in turn, lead to a depraved mind. The force that has been holding back these sins has been the knowledge of God derived from observing the created universe. This truth about God as Creator and Judge tempers the evil impulses of unsaved men.

Sin Restrained by Inner Conscience

Eighth, the apostle Paul emphatically teaches that sin is restricted by the warnings of one's conscience. Even within an unbeliever the human conscience is an effective restraint against the unhindered pursuit of sin. Paul presents the degree to which unbelievers are lost when he argues,

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves, even though they do not have the law. They show that the work of the law is written on their hearts, while their conscience also bears witness, and their conflicting thoughts accuse or even excuse them. (Rom. 2:14–15)

In other words, the human conscience serves as the inner witness that enables men and women to make a proper moral evaluation between right and wrong. The divine law is written upon every human heart. Spiritual death does not deactivate the activity of conscience. What is recorded in the Scripture regarding morality is, in a general sense, written upon the unconverted heart. Unbelievers' consciences either accuse them of wrongdoing or excuse them of right doing. They instinctively know what is wrong and feel some restraint from pursuing it. When they violate their consciences they heap upon themselves feelings of guilt, which become a restraint toward sin.

This awareness of sin, even in the hearts of unbelievers, is the common grace of God at work. The human conscience restrains unconverted men in their participation in sin by bringing about a stinging accusation of wrongdoing. Though an unbeliever may persist in sin, he will nevertheless feel some general restraint in his pursuit of it.

Sin Restrained by Human Government

Ninth, the apostle Paul also notes that sin is restrained by the divine establishment of human government. Civil authorities are put in place by God to reward good and to restrain sin in a fallen world. The apostle Paul writes,

Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment. For rulers are not a terror to good conduct, but to bad. Would you have no fear of the one who is in authority? Then do what is good, and you will receive his approval, for he is God's servant for your good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword in vain. For he is the servant of God, an avenger who carries out God's wrath on the wrongdoer. Therefore one must be in subjection, not only to avoid God's wrath but also for the sake of conscience. (Rom. 13:1–5)

This biblical text states that human government derives its authority from God himself. As the sovereign Ruler of the universe, God has established the institution of government over its citizens for the good of the people. The Lord has appointed government officials to punish evildoers who break the government's laws. These civil laws and their corresponding punishments act as deterrents to crime. Legal codes help to restrain evil while protecting life and property. The powers that be are to administer wrath against those who take the life of another.

The government even bears “the sword” and is, therefore, to wield it in capital punishment.

To this day, any government that establishes just laws and corresponding punishments serves as a restrainer of sin and as a preventative restriction against crimes of lawlessness. This is an extension of the common grace of God, namely his goodness in preventing further participation in evil by that government’s citizens.

Sin Restrained by Gospel Truth

Tenth, the author of Hebrews indicates that unbelievers who hear the words of gospel truth are, in some tangible way, restricted in their sin. This restraint of sin is the general conviction that accompanies all gospel preaching. The author of Hebrews writes,

For it is impossible, in the case of those who have once been enlightened, who have tasted the heavenly gift, and have shared in the Holy Spirit, and have tasted the goodness of the word of God and the powers of the age to come, and then have fallen away, to restore them again to repentance, since they are crucifying once again the Son of God to their own harm and holding him up to contempt. (Heb. 6:4–6)

These verses teach that there is a general enlightenment that the Spirit gives through the gospel. Although this illumination falls short of the special, saving work of the Spirit, this initial orientation to truth leads an unbeliever to taste the gospel but not to swallow it. Such an unconverted person becomes a mere partaker of the Spirit’s ministry but not an inward possessor of it. This individual experiences the Spirit’s power but does not exercise saving faith in Christ. Instead, he falls away from the very entrance into the kingdom. It is impossible to renew this person again to this place of repentance. By his unbelief, he crucifies the Lord Jesus Christ and tramples underfoot his precious blood.

Under the preaching of the gospel, unbelievers experience moral restraint as a result of hearing the truth. They are gripped by the message, though not grounded in it. These who hear the gospel receive the general blessing that accompanies hearing the truth even if they never receive saving faith. This is the moral restraint of God's common grace.

God's Restraint of Wrath

A second aspect of the doctrine of common grace is God's restraint of his immediate wrath upon sinful men. That sinners are not directly consigned to hell the moment they sin is clear evidence of his general love to them. This postponement of divine vengeance is the result of his patience and longsuffering for sinners. Let us now consider this withholding of divine judgment.

Wrath Restrained in the Garden

At the dawn of civilization, God pronounced the sentence of death upon the one who sins against him. God emphatically stated that all sin—even the first sin—must be punished by death. Yet when Adam and Eve ate from the forbidden fruit, they did not immediately die physically.

“But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.” . . .

So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate, and she also gave some to her husband who was with her, and he ate. Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked. And they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves loincloths. (Gen. 2:17; 3:6–7)

Death was promised to the one who breaks God's moral law. This would result in death at every level—physically, spiritually,

and even eternally. But Adam and Eve chose to disobey God. Amazingly, the lives of the disobedient pair were not immediately taken. After they ate the prohibited food, they remained alive. The execution of the death penalty was delayed for years as God demonstrated his patience toward them.

The fact is, the moment that Adam and Eve sinned they died spiritually and became separated from God. Likewise, the lifelong process of physical death began, resulting in aging and eventual death. Nevertheless, their lives were not instantly required of them by God.

Since this original sin, most members of the human race have not immediately died or been subjected to hell at the moment they sinned. For the millennia since, unbelieving sinners have been allowed to live for many years, despite their initial and continued acts of sin. Though God promised death, he is longsuffering and has withheld the infliction of his immediate punishment. This temporal delay of divine vengeance is an expression of his common grace toward both nonelect and elect sinners. God lovingly postpones his eternal condemnation in order to extend time for unbelievers to repent. By this, God gives prolonged opportunities for even the reprobate to come to saving faith in Christ.

Wrath Restrained before the Flood

Further, divine wrath was restrained in the days before the flood. Persistent unbelief in God and rampant sexual immorality demanded his immediate judgment, but he nevertheless remained patient toward sinners. The biblical account reads, “Then the LORD said, ‘My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years’ ” (Gen. 6:3).

Throughout the one hundred twenty years during which Noah built the ark, God delayed the wrath that justly deserved to be unleashed upon the entire human race. During this prolonged period, divine vengeance was restrained against guilty sinners, giving them extended time to repent. In the days of

Noah, this longsuffering of God (1 Peter 3:20) was his common grace toward mankind.

In every subsequent era of human history God has, likewise, been longsuffering toward unrepentant sinners though they have continued to engross themselves in their pursuit of iniquity. To this present hour God remains forbearing toward those who flaunt his moral law and live in flagrant sin. Despite the mounting iniquities of this adulterous generation God gives repeated opportunities to the unbelieving world to turn from their sins and believe in his Son, Jesus Christ.

Wrath Restrained during the Incarnation

Even when God chose to bring his immediate wrath upon sinners, he chose to do so not with the majority but with the minority. Luke's gospel gives account of God's immediate judgment upon isolated individuals during Christ's earthly ministry, though he postponed punishing the many. Luke records,

There were some present at that very time who told him about the Galileans whose blood Pilate had mingled with their sacrifices. And he answered them, "Do you think that these Galileans were worse sinners than all the other Galileans, because they suffered in this way? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish. Or those eighteen on whom the tower in Siloam fell and killed them: do you think that they were worse offenders than all the others who lived in Jerusalem? No, I tell you; but unless you repent, you will all likewise perish." (Luke 13:1–5)

In this account Jesus responds to the sudden judgment of God upon the Galileans and those on whom the tower in Siloam fell. Both these instances involved the unexpected taking of the lives of humans who were sinful and deserved death. In response, Jesus addressed those who survived and announced that they were equally deserving of such destruction. Instead it was the longsuffering of God that had suspended divine judgment upon

them. By implication it was the common grace of God that withheld his swift recompense. God graciously chose to give Jesus' listeners the opportunity to repent, lest they likewise perish.

The same is true with God's wrath in this present day. Though many have denied his existence and cursed his name, God has patiently allowed these blasphemers to live a full and long life. This world is filled with God-haters and atheists who have shaken their angry fists in the face of God. Yet God has chosen to restrain his just vengeance from immediately consuming them in order to graciously grant them time to respond to him in repentance and faith.

Wrath Restrained toward the Gentiles

Moreover, the apostle Paul announced that God has restrained his wrath toward all the nations of the world. He has postponed his judgment and given them repeated opportunities to repent. Speaking at Lystra, the apostle proclaims, "In past generations he allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways" (Acts 14:16).

Paul is stating that God permitted the nations to pursue their own path. Throughout the ages, God allowed all peoples to go astray. During the long centuries he permitted them to choose their own way of life and to live in sin. In so doing God did not immediately serve the execution of the death penalty upon them, but he endured their defiance with longsuffering.

In his Areopagus address Paul proclaimed this same truth to the Athenian philosophers: "The times of ignorance God overlooked, but now he commands all people everywhere to repent" (Acts 17:30).

When Paul states that God "overlooked" their sinful ignorance, he means that God chose not to judge the pagan nations immediately for their sins. For centuries God has demonstrated patience toward unconverted man's sin and ignorance. In his common grace he temporarily stayed the sentence of death. This does not mean that God pardoned the nations of their

sins. Rather, God held them accountable to him and condemned their sin, but did not immediately punish them. Their times of ignorance have now come to an end through the preaching of the gospel. Yet God remains longsuffering in withholding his immediate wrath.

Wrath Restrained toward the Jews

Similarly, the apostle Paul teaches that God has been restrained in his wrath toward the unbelieving Jewish nation. For centuries past, Israel disobeyed God, yet he momentarily withheld his death sentence upon them. Describing the spiritual state of the Jewish people, Paul explains,

Or do you presume on the riches of his kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance? But because of your hard and impenitent heart you are storing up wrath for yourself on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment will be revealed. (Rom. 2:4–5)

Throughout their history God bestowed unprecedented goodness upon his chosen people. In his kindness God gave them great material and spiritual blessings. He graced them with a bountiful land, a righteous law, a magnificent temple, a spiritual priesthood, providential care, and countless more blessings. But Israel sinned repeatedly against him. In response God patiently endured their many transgressions and rebellions. Even when Israel crucified God's Son he patiently endured, with much longsuffering, this rebellious nation.

God's delaying of his judgment does not deny its inescapable reality; that day of final reckoning is coming soon. The unbelieving nation is storing up wrath until it will be unleashed on the final day. In the end God's righteous judgment will be executed in all its fury. However, common grace is presently

holding back God's wrath and providing an extended time for the Jewish people to repent.

Wrath Restrained toward the Unbelieving

Finally, the apostle Peter teaches that God temporarily stays his judgment toward the unbeliever, giving them further opportunity to repent. In his second epistle Peter states: "The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance" (2 Peter 3:9). According to this text God delays the return of Christ because of his grace and mercy toward sinners. In so doing he allows them additional opportunity to turn from their sins and believe in Christ. At the appointed time, when the last of the elect has trusted in him, Jesus will return. But this present delay is a gracious period of postponed judgment that is pending for the unregenerate.

Though some believers do not understand why God chooses to withhold his judgment, the reason lies in his patience toward the unbelieving. While it is the general desire of God that all men be saved, he has not decreed the redemption of all. In the face of the world's unbelief he graciously provides extended time for sinners to repent. It is his common grace that gives this expanded opportunity to impenitent sinners.

By His Grace, for His Glory

Every blessing, whether physical or spiritual, that comes into the lives of sinful human beings is the direct result of God's grace. Saving grace is unto the glory of God (Eph. 1:6, 12, 14), but so also is common grace to the praise of his glory. Ultimately, the truth of God's universal benevolence to all mankind should lead every believer to praise his holy name.

This was the invitation of the psalmist as he called upon every believer to give praise to the Lord for his goodness to all. The psalmist David declares,

The LORD is good to all,
and his mercy is over all that he has made.

All your works shall give thanks to you, O LORD,
and all your saints shall bless you! (Ps. 145:9–10)

With common grace clearly in mind, David urges all believers to consider God’s goodness to all and his mercies over all his works. As we meditate upon God’s kindness to all—including his restraint of sin and his withholding of immediate judgment upon this depraved world—our response must be to rise up and bless the Lord.

It is incumbent upon every believer to have a comprehensive knowledge of God’s operation of grace in this world. In so doing, we as believers must extol and magnify the Lord for his common grace in much the same way as we praise him for his saving grace. As you contemplate the common grace of God, just as the psalmist David did, does this glorious truth stir up the same response within your own heart?

For Discussion

1. Are you familiar with the doctrine of total depravity? The Westminster Confession of Faith explains it as coming from the corruption of our original parents, “whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil” (WCF 6.4). Would you agree with this doctrine?
2. How does common grace explain why total depravity does not result in totally depraved behavior?
3. The author gives ten ways in which God restrains sin. Can you give examples of any of the ways listed that you have observed or even experienced in your own life?
4. For what purposes would God restrain sin? Think in terms of his own character and his purposes for man.

5. Do you ever question the justice of God? Do the answers that the author gives help you to understand what seems like undue delay or even misapplied justice?
6. How should understanding God's purposes for restraining his wrath affect how you exercise restraint of your own anger, even righteous anger?
7. Does God's restraint lead you to worship him for his "universal benevolence to all mankind"?

The problem of evil is one we're all familiar with . . . but what about the problem of **good**?

If Christianity is true, why do many people seem to live moral, fulfilling lives outside the gospel? Do such moral non-Christians really need the gospel, or will their good deeds save them? Is the traditional view of hell really justified? And if it is, how do we evangelize people who seem more upright than we are? Can we legitimately benefit from their contributions to culture and society?

Many of the answers to these questions lie in the doctrine of common grace. Here authors from a variety of backgrounds tackle these questions and others by exploring God's common grace and its daily implications.

Includes discussion questions.

"We struggle to explain why good things happen to bad people. . . . Why do so many sinners . . . receive so many divine blessings? And why does God allow so many good things to happen in the world through the actions of people who do not serve him, as well as through people who do? . . . Pastor Clark has dedicated his life to explaining biblical truth in clear, practical ways and to solving spiritual problems in the life of the church. He does all of that here, in *The Problem of Good*. There is no other book like it."

—**Philip Graham Ryken**, President, Wheaton College,
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