

What Is Common Grace For The Common Good?

June 28, 2015

Good morning CrossWinds. If you are new, it is great to have you worshiping with us. We are in a series called Work Matters To God. Before we jump into our study, let me lay out the rest of the summer's teaching so you know what to expect.

Next week, we will look at what the Bible says about productivity at work. There are many books on how to be productive, like David Allen's Getting Things Done and Matt Perman's What's Best Next? We thought it would be good to see what the Bible has to say on the subject.

The following week we will finish the series by answering the questions you submitted on integrating our faith to our work.

After that I have a little vacation. We aren't going anyplace. It will be a staycation. It will be a good break for the family. When I return we will have a short series answering some crucial questions about sex in the media. We will look at "What does the Bible says about premarital sex?" and "What does the Bible say about homosexuality?" That took on new importance after last week's supreme court decision legalizing homosexual marriage. Finally, we will look at "What does the Bible say about transgender?" We could subtitle that, "What would God say to Bruce/Caitlyn Jenner?" My goal in those messages is not to demean anyone but to teach us from the Bible. I want us to know how to think biblically and how to honor Christ and love others when we talk about those questions with our friends and neighbors. These are very important topics in our culture.

After that it will be fall. As we get our feet on the ground after the busy summer, we will begin a verse-by-verse study of the book of Genesis. That series will bring us through most of next year.

We aren't there yet. Today, we are on the topic of work. Let's jump into this morning's study. This morning I will talk about something I haven't talked about of the last eight years. It is something you don't usually hear from the pulpit, but it is essential to understand if we are going to be a church on mission to reach our community. Let me introduce the topic.

Do you ever find yourself jealous of others' success? Maybe you are a student trying to follow Christ. You try your best in school but you are, and will always be, just an average student. On the athletic field you have average athletic ability. That wouldn't get under your skin too much if it wasn't for others in your class that seem too gifted. They party on Friday night. They eat the wrong food. They don't study hard but they always get an "A". On the athletic field they are amazing. The coach calls them naturals. They are far from God. They have no interest in Christ. You tell God this is unfair. You try to honor God but are average. They have no interest in God and are gifted. How do you explain it?

Another way to look at it is from the business world. Maybe you are a Christian business man trying to honor Christ. You give generously and sacrificially to your church. You are good at what you do. When it comes time for a promotion, they don't give you the promotion. You get passed over. They give it to somebody of equal talent to yourself but they don't love Christ. They

are a virtual pagan. Why would God gift someone far from him with a promotion instead of you. It doesn't feel fair. How do you explain it?

Another way to look at this is from a completely different angle. Imagine you find yourself in need of a critical life-saving operation. There are two doctors available to you in the hospital that can perform the surgery. One is a Christian doctor of good, but not noteworthy, skill. The other is a world renowned surgeon that specializes in the operation you need. The problem is that this surgeon is a Muslim. Which doctor do you choose? The one with world renowned skill or the one that aligns with your faith?

To answer these questions we need to understand something in the Bible seldom discussed from the pulpit. It is called God's common grace. We need to understand how God uses his common grace for the common good of society. To help us understand common grace we need to define it. I want to define it next to saving grace because common grace and saving grace are both from God, but they are different.

What is common grace?

- *Common grace is God's unmerited favor extended to all people made in the image of the triune God regardless of their eternal destiny.*

The word common means it is something given to all people and not restricted to Christians. God is incredibly kind to all kinds of people in all kinds of cultures, even people that are very far from him.

- *Saving grace only comes through Jesus and it is the only way to have a restored relationship with God.*

Saving grace is when God brings us to hear the good news of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit makes the good news of Jesus Christ click in our hearts. We see our sin. We realize our complete inability to save ourselves from our sin and our need for complete dependence upon God's grace through Jesus to save us from our sin and restore us to a right relationship with God. The ability to see your sin, see your need for Jesus and trust in Jesus is a supernatural gift of God. It is God's saving grace. In our salvation, God gets all the credit.

Common grace is different. It doesn't save any but it means God is incredibly kind to all people, even people far from him. He gifts people in the world like a farmer scatters his seed. Let me show you how the Bible describes common grace.

1. Common grace is God's kindness shown to everything he made.

The Lord is good to all, and his mercy is over all that he has made. Psalm 145:9 (ESV)

As sinners we deserve nothing but immediate eternity in hell. God is kind and compassionate. He has restrained his hand of judgment to be kind and to give people a chance to repent. Not only is he kind to us by giving us more time to repent but he blesses us by giving us health, life, strength, work and families even when we haven't repented. God is incredibly kind to everyone and everything when we deserve destruction and condemnation.

The eyes of all look to you, and you give them their food in due season. You open your hand; you satisfy the desire of every living thing. Psalm 145:15–16 (ESV)

It is God's common grace that provides food for the birds. He provides sun and rain for the crops. He provides not too much rain to drown the crops and

not too little rain to wither the crops. He provides warmth, heat and light. He provides health, life and strength. God's common grace is what gives enough sun to grow the grain and enough cloudy days to not wilt the grain.

The beautiful days of sunshine everyone gets to enjoy at this time of year all come from God's common grace upon his creation. It is not just Christians that enjoy these beautiful days. Health, life, beauty, success, work and freedom are all gifts of God's common grace. Everybody, regardless of their eternal destinies, gets to enjoy them.

2. Common grace is the universal recognition of God's existence.

For as I passed along and observed the objects of your worship, I found also an altar with this inscription, 'To the unknown god.' **What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you...** Acts 17:23 (ESV)

Two weeks ago, when I was traveling to California, I went to board my plane in Sioux Falls, and the agent at the gate informed us the flight was overbooked. They asked for five of us to take a later flight. To compensate us for our inconvenience they would give up a few hundred dollars in Delta ticket vouchers. Nobody wanted to take the vouchers so he started raising the size of the offer. When he finally got up to \$1,300 in free airline tickets I decided this was a free vacation I wanted. This was an easy way to take my honey on vacation this winter.

Why was my flight overbooked? Apparently the archery world championships were held in Yankton. The teams from 51 countries were flying out of the tiny Sioux Falls airport so the place was packed and most flights were overbooked.

A few hours later I was waiting for my next flight. I was the odd man out because I was not wearing a jacket with a country name sewn between the shoulders. Guess what happened? The plane was overbooked. They started offering airline vouchers to take a later flight. The problem was this agent was not as generous. She got stuck at \$800. Having learned from my earlier flight that \$1,300 was the maximum Delta airlines was allowed to offer I couldn't resist. When the ticket agent was desperate I went to the counter and offered to take a later flight if she would give me another \$1,300 in free airline tickets. It felt like "Let's make a deal." She went for it. I know my wife would be proud, because now I had \$2,600 in airline tickets.

The catch was that to take a later flight I needed to take that flight out of Minneapolis. I needed to drive a rental car from Sioux Falls to Minneapolis. The U.S. archery coach and a Canadian team competitor were also bumped off the flight and needed to take flights from Minneapolis so they rode in the car with me.

This wasn't the way I planned my day but now I had four hours to learn about archery from some of the best archers in the world and a chance to talk about Jesus with people that didn't begin their day expecting to hear about him.

As I drove I prayed about a lead-in line to begin a Christ conversation. I decided to casually ask them if they went to church. One guy immediately began telling me about his church. No worries with this guy. He knew Jesus. The other guy came right out and told me he was an atheist. I then knew one of the reasons God gave me this unplanned diversion.

I began praying for a way to bring Christ into that conversation. Here is the line I chose. I asked him if he was an atheist or an agnostic. He didn't know the difference so I explained it to him. An atheist says there is no God. The entire world came from absolutely nothing. It ordered itself from nothing. It will eventually become nothing. There is no meaning. There is no such thing as truth other than what we define. There is no such thing as absolute right or wrong. True atheism is a hard position to hold. An agnostic believes there is a God because somebody created this planet, ordered this planet and put everything on this planet. An agnostic believes there is a God but we simply don't know him. Like I suspected, my new friend claimed he was an agnostic, not an atheist. The reason he changed was because of God's common grace. With God's common grace stamped on the heart of everyone comes the knowledge that God exists. Everyone looks at creation and the heavens declare the glory of God. There is this common ground of God's existence that by common grace God has stamped on all consciences.

This recognition of God is not enough to save us. It is only enough to condemn us. It was this common ground of God's existence that Paul appealed to in Athens and it was the common ground of God's existence that I appealed to on that car ride. Like Paul, I simply said, "Let me tell you the rest of the story about the God you know exists and about his son, Jesus."

3. Common grace is a universal consciousness of sin.

For when Gentiles, who do not have the law, by nature do what the law requires, they are a law to themselves ... 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. Romans 2:14–15 (ESV)

The sense of guilt for sin that everyone experiences is a gift of God's common grace. People do not need to read the Bible to know murder is wrong. By God's common grace, consciousness of sin is stamped upon all psyches. Guilt for sin is also part of God's common grace. Guilt for sin is what helps restrain the spread of sin. Imagine what this world would be like if nobody felt guilty for sin. By God's common grace everyone feels guilty.

4. Common grace is the universal blessing of enjoying God's creation.

Common grace is God letting his creation bless even unjust people.

But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, 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. Matthew 5:44–45 (ESV)

God doesn't just give a good harvest to Christian farmers. Through God's common grace he is even kind to godless farmers. Many times he even gives farmers far from God a good harvest. When a Christian farmer has a good harvest, he worships God and credits God for the good harvest. When a farmer that is far from God has a good harvest, he worships either himself or mother nature. The truth is that God was behind the good harvest and the reason he gave the good harvest to the farmer far from God was out of his common grace to the farmer that doesn't deserve it.

5. Common grace is scientific discoveries.

The Bible says any advancement in farming and improvement in agriculture doesn't come from the ingenuity of the farmer. It comes from God as a gift of his common grace upon the farmer. Look how Isaiah says all scientific discoveries in sowing and harvesting are from God.

Give ear, and hear my voice; give attention, and hear my speech. Does he who plows for sowing plow continually? Does he continually open and harrow his ground? When he has leveled its surface, does he not scatter dill, sow cumin, and put in wheat in rows and barley in its proper place, and emmer as the border? For he is rightly instructed; his God teaches him. Dill is not threshed with a threshing sledge, nor is a cart wheel rolled over cumin, but dill is beaten out with a stick, and cumin with a rod. Does one crush grain for bread? No, he does not thresh it forever; when he drives his cart wheel over it with his horses, he does not crush it. This also comes from the Lord of hosts; he is wonderful in counsel and excellent in wisdom. Isaiah 28:23–29 (ESV)

Everything a farmer learns about how to plant and how to harvest is not from his own ingenuity but it is a gift of God's common grace and kindness to the farmer for the common good of all.

I want us to notice that farming is only an example. All human culture ultimately follows the same pattern as farming. Every advancement in medicine came about as a gift of God's common grace upon humanity. Every invention that makes work better and our lives better is a gift from God, and it came about as a result of God's common grace for the common good of humanity.

6. Common grace is beauty and artistic gifts.

Every beautiful work of art is ultimately from God's common grace upon unredeemed and fallen humanity. Every beautiful piece of music and every piece of artwork has its origins in God's common grace upon humanity.

The Lord said to Moses, "See, I have called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah, and I have filled him with the Spirit of God, with ability and intelligence, with knowledge and all craftsmanship, to devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze... Exodus 31:1–4 (ESV)

Artistic skills come as a gift from God. God gives them as a way to bless society, to bless people and to ultimately bless us.

7. Common grace is every good gift given by God to his creation.

Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. James 1:17 (ESV)

Knowing that God intentionally gifts people, even fallen people that don't care about him, to bless the world and to bless others is very important. It completely changes the way we think about life.

How does common grace change the way I think?

1. Understanding common grace moves me out of my little Christian enclave.

There is a trend in the American church to cut out of our lives people that don't know Jesus. We think we should only go to Christian doctors, Christian lawyers and Christian counselors. It is easy to start thinking we can only appreciate overtly Christian art and only value overtly Christian music. What happens is Christians start to extract themselves from society. They don't realize that God intentionally blesses people far from him with his common grace to bless us.

There is a healthy tension in this. For example, while it is great to have a Christian doctor, just because a doctor is a Christian doctor, that doesn't mean they are the right doctor or the best doctor for your needs. God, in his common grace, may give a Muslim doctor greater skill than a Christian doctor. You may have a medical complication where the best surgeon is a man or woman far from Jesus. Even though the Muslim doctor doesn't know God is the one who gave him his skill to bless society, you know that. You give God the credit for his common grace kindness. The Muslim doctor doesn't know God's saving grace

through Jesus but he is a beneficiary of God's common grace to bless society. The reason God gives these common grace gifts to those far from God is it forces us out of our little Christian enclave so we build relationships with people that need to hear the gospel because we need to be blessed through their common grace gifts. If we don't recognize God's common grace given to all people, we will live in a Christian bubble and we won't be a light in our world. We won't value God's gifting of people far from him.

Early in our marriage Cindy and I disconnected cable TV to save money. We were told about an all-Christian satellite TV television network. The price was modest compared to cable and the advertising looked good so we thought we would give it a try. It turned out to be a poor choice. Most of the channels were poor teaching televangelists just asking for money. Some programs were good but many were cheesy and poorly done. While the hearts of the producers were good, they were not gifted with the skills needed to have a good production.

While not all programs on cable are wholesome, I missed being blessed by the good programs on the History Channel and on the Discovery Channel and National Geographic. Those channels are not Christian channels, but God-gifted producers far from God produce good quality programming. Because of God's common grace I don't need to just look at the all-Christian satellite TV. I can watch the wholesome programs on cable and give God the glory for gifting people far from God to come up with decent quality productions. Of course there is a lot that is not wholesome, but there are still some decent programs I can enjoy that do not come from an all-Christian perspective.

A great example of allowing yourself to be blessed by God's common grace given to people far from God happened when Israel was taken into exile in Babylon. Babylon was a godless city. The Bible describes Babylon as the poster child for the fallen wicked cities of the world. Look how Revelation describes Babylon.

And on her forehead was written a name of mystery: "Babylon the great, mother of prostitutes and of earth's abominations." Revelation 17:5 (ESV)

And he called out with a mighty voice, "Fallen, fallen is Babylon the great! She has become a dwelling place for demons, a haunt for every unclean spirit, a haunt for every unclean bird, a haunt for every unclean and detestable beast." Revelation 18:2 (ESV)

Imagine what the Jews felt like when they were moved into a section of that really wicked city. They wanted to extract themselves from society. They wanted to only use Jewish doctors, Jewish lawyers and buy clothes from Jewish stores. They wanted to live in a little cultural enclave. That isn't what God told them to do.

"Thus says the Lord of hosts, the God of Israel, to all the exiles whom I have sent into exile from Jerusalem to Babylon: Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare." Jeremiah 29:4–7 (ESV)

God wanted them to settle down and get involved in the life of the city. Appreciate the common grace God had given to these godless people. Pray for them. Help the city flourish. Be a light to them not by running away from them but by working with them and appreciating God's common grace to them, and as the Jews built bridges into the godless society they were to tell people about the truth God of the universe.

This is an essential paradigm for CrossWinds church. Spirit Lake is not as godless a city as Babylon. Our job is not to build a little cultural enclave of Christians on the corner of 28th and Erie. We are to pray for the good of our city. We are to work for the welfare of our city. We are to recognize and appreciate God's common grace given to all people in our city, not just the Christians. We are to participate in the life of the city so we build bridges of influences. By not giving all his common grace to Christians but by scattering it throughout our city we are forced to integrate with our city.

2. Understanding common grace helps me value work that is not overtly done in Jesus' name.

If we don't understand common grace we think the only work God values is overtly Christian work. If you are an artist, it is tempting to think the only work God values is artwork that has Jesus as its theme. While Jesus is always the best theme, that doesn't mean God doesn't value well-done artwork. If you are an engineer designing motorcycles, you don't have to design a motorcycle with a cross etched into its frame for God to value your design work. If you are a teacher, you don't need to teach in a Christian school to have your work count for God. If you work for a company, you don't need to work for a Christian company to have your work be pleasing to Jesus. Knowing that all scientific discoveries and all artwork is a gift of God's common grace helps us value all the good work that blesses society that is not done overtly in Jesus' name.

If we don't understand common grace we can end up with a judgmental attitude toward good work that is done by people far from God. We undervalue their work because it is not expressly Christian.

As I was preparing this message I found myself appreciating my laptop. From what I know about the people running the company that made my laptop, while they are very gifted by God's common grace, they are also very far from God. I can appreciate my laptop. I can be blessed by their good work even though it wasn't specifically Christian work. I can give God credit for the laptop because he is behind every scientific discovery, and I can use my laptop as an opportunity to enter into conversations about Jesus. I don't have to not buy the laptop and stay in a little Christian enclave because it wasn't made by an expressly Christian company.

3. Understanding common grace helps me value God's gifts from other cultures.

If we don't understand that God often shows kindness to people far from God, we will undervalue what God has done out of kindness to other cultures. How many of you like Chinese food? Anybody like Mongolian BBQ? I appreciate the culinary gifts given by God's common grace to those cultures. I can value those common grace recipes because there is good in them that blesses society. Does the chef in the Chinese restaurant need to hear about Jesus? Of course! The best way for me to tell him about Jesus is to go to the Chinese restaurant, enjoy a good plate of General Tso's Chicken, tell the chef how much I appreciate his cooking and use that as an opportunity to tell him about Jesus. How can I tell him about Jesus if I won't eat the good Chinese food he makes?

Understanding God's common grace for the common good to other cultures is essential to sharing Jesus in other cultures. It moves us into society and keeps us from becoming a little subculture.

4. Understanding common grace explains why non-Christians can exceed Christians in morality and wisdom.

By God's common grace there are some really nice people out there that don't know Jesus. They are not saved because nobody is saved apart from God's saving grace through Jesus, but by God's common grace everyone is not as evil as they could be. Some people, by God's common grace, are really nice folks.

A few years ago I found myself in a conversation with a woman about her Muslim father. She said her Muslim father was the most moral, kind and loving person she ever met. She went on to describe how he gave to the poor and loved his family. She claimed he was kinder and gentler than any Christian she met. She was sure he was going to heaven.

She was probably right about him being kind and gentle but she was wrong about the heaven part. The Bible says nobody is going to heaven apart from God's saving grace in Jesus. While some of us are more sinful than others, all of us are sufficiently sinful to be separated from God and suffer eternal never-ending punishment for eternity.

Some people, by God's common grace are just nice people even though they are far from God. The reason he was so kind, giving and moral is God's common grace. Imagine what his character would be like if he also experienced God's saving grace!

We are to be a people that image God by extending common grace to those that don't deserve it.

Now that we understand that our God is a God of common grace and he loves to bless people in practical ways, not just with saving grace, it should change the way we live and work. Just as God extends his common grace to people who are undeserving, God calls us to extend common grace to people who are far from him, just like he has.

The reason why this is so important is because *the root of saving grace grows best in the fertile soil of common grace*. When we show undeserved kindness to people that are far from God and we value their well-done work, it opens the door for people to hear about the saving grace of God through Jesus.

One of the best places to extend undeserved common grace is in the workplace because that is where we rub shoulders with the most people. It is in the workplace we can graciously and joyfully serve patients, customers, fellow employees and the students we teach. Here are a few suggestions:

1. Move beyond tolerance to care.

Most workplaces have a tolerance initiative encouraging employees to be tolerant of people from different cultures and races. Move beyond tolerance and extend grace to people that are different from us, especially people that are far from God. Value their work. Value the gifts God gave them out of his common grace. We don't need to agree with or applaud the sin in their lives. We get to value God's common grace that is given to their lives.

See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but **always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.** 1 Thessalonians 5:15 (ESV)

It is in the fertile soil of common grace that the message of saving grace takes root.

2. Show compassion to the weak and outcasts.

A great example of common grace in the workplace comes from the story of Ruth. You can read her story in the book of Ruth in your Bible. She is a Moabite woman that went back to Israel with Naomi, her mother-in-law. Naomi and Ruth went back dirt poor. Ruth ended up gathering leftover grain in the field of a man named Boaz after the harvesters went through. That was how the poor found food. They picked up the leftovers. Ruth was poor. Ruth was a foreigner. She had everything against her. Boaz extended common grace to her. He made sure she had water to drink. He made sure there was a little left for her to provide for herself and her mother-in-law. Boaz showed common grace to a poor foreign woman living among them.

In our town we have poor foreigners living among us. They work in our fields. They work in our construction industry. It is easy to ignore them but God tells us to show common grace to them. God has given them common grace, we are also to extend common grace.

It is in the fertile soil of common grace that the message of saving grace takes root.

3. Affirm good work done by people far from God.

Affirm work that is well-done even when it comes from people that are hostile to Jesus. Use it as common ground. Imagine there is an art show in Spirit Lake. In the art show one of the paintings is done by a homosexual. How do we handle this to glorify God? We can affirm the well-done artwork done by a

homosexual because his or her gifts are from God. We can affirm his or her well-done work without affirming the lifestyle.

Remember that it is in the fertile soil of common grace that the roots of saving grace grow best.

4. Be kind and merciful to my enemies.

But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil. Be merciful, even as your Father is merciful. Luke 6:35–36 (ESV)

Just as God is kind and extends common grace to his enemies, we are to be kind and extend common grace toward our enemies. When people hurt us it is easy to let a root of bitterness grow in our heart. It is easy to dream of revenge. We are to be like God and extend grace to those who don't deserve it.

It is in the fertile soil of extending common grace that the roots of saving grace take root.

5. Pray for my boss.

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way. 1 Timothy 2:1–2 (ESV)

Pray for your boss, even if they are far from God. Pray for our president no matter where he is in his relationship with Jesus. Praying for our boss at work and the leadership of our country, no matter where they are at with Jesus is showing common grace toward them. We don't just work for a boss, by common grace we pray for our bosses.

It is in the fertile soil of God's common grace that the roots of saving grace grow best.

Conclusion

This week let our new understanding of God's common grace change the way we work. Know that God gifts people far from him to bless society. God extends common grace for the common good. Let that move us out of our Christian sub-culture to appreciate God's gifts given to others in society. Let it help us build bridges into our world so that we can be an influence for Jesus in our culture. That was the way God directed his people when they lived in Babylon. It is the way God directs us as we live in Spirit Lake and surrounding communities.

Remember that the roots of saving grace grow best in the fertile soil of common grace that we extend with our lives.



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