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THE PROBLEM OF GOOD

by SCOTT KAUFFMANN

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You know the problem of evil: if God's so good, why is the world so bad?

At some point, it's been a barrier to faith for nearly everyone. Yet when, by God's grace, you begin to grasp the sin in your own heart, the weight of the problem shifts from the evil "out there" to the evil "in here." Then you can see the Cross for what it is: God's greatest gift and the solution to our biggest problem.

Still, as Christ-followers, if we're paying attention, we're faced with the opposite problem – *the problem of good*. Namely, if we're all so bad, why is the world so good?

Why does a non-Christian firefighter go back up the stairs on 9/11 to save a non-Christian financial worker? How come unbelievers are responsible for so much goodness, truth, and beauty? At the personal level, why do I know so many unbelievers who are morally better than I am – more honest, more sacrificial, more joyful, more committed to other people? What do I do with that? And why can artists and filmmakers and musicians who seem personally unredeemable make paintings and films and music and books that are so unmistakably transcendent? Am I supposed to stay away from that stuff because the artist is not coming at things from a Christian worldview?

If you're like me, these questions haunt you. They demand answers, and the answers we choose are vital. Because how we solve the problem of good drives whom we love, what we fear, how we work, how we share our faith, and how we consume media and entertainment. It significantly impacts how we reach, engage, change, create, shape, and battle with culture.

Logically, there are three possible answers to the problem of good.

1. "Comic grace": we're good enough to save ourselves
2. "Cosmic waste": goodness outside salvation is an illusion
3. "Common grace": goodness outside salvation is God's gift to everyone

Christians must reject comic grace. But what about cosmic waste? Unknowingly, many of us actually live our lives this way. We divide the world into "secular" and "sacred" categories. The secular parts

are of temporary use to us but of no significant use to God. The non-Christians are part of our world, but they aren't doing anything that contributes to God's eternal purposes, and we need to be careful not to get too close to their agenda. If people aren't going to be saved, it doesn't really matter what they do, except to the extent that they make life better for those who *are* going to be saved.

When you follow this view to its logical conclusion, it means that all this goodness you see is irrelevant at best, or a malicious illusion at worst. The love, compassion, and honesty you think you see coming from non-Christians is really just Satan's simulation to take us away from Christ. So the sacrifice of those 9/11 firefighters? That's not really sacrifice, it's just selfishness in disguise. The unbelieving couple that reconcile and learn to love each other again? That isn't really love. The non-Christian doctor healing a non-Christian patient? Doesn't show up on God's eternal scorecard.

To me, the "cosmic waste" view doesn't offer a satisfying solution to the problem of good. At a theological level, it's inconsistent with so much of the story of Scripture; and at a practical level, it's unlivable.

LEARNING COMMON GRACE

I believe the best answer to the problem of good is common grace. Common grace is one of the most essential, useful, redemptive, and dangerous truths to understand as we interact with the world around us. It helps us understand God, our world, and others. An appreciation for common grace can help set us free from so many of the fears, prejudices, and UnChristian¹ behavior we so often wallow in as Christians, as we pursue relationships, evangelism, work, cultural engagement, and arts and entertainment. And it solves the problem of good both theologically and practically.

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Let's start with some key elements of common grace.

1. God gives immense grace (unmerited favor) to all His creatures, in many ways.
2. God cares about more than just saving individual souls. That is certainly of great interest to Him, but it's not His only interest. He also cares about restoring His creation to glory through the coming of His kingdom.
3. God is the author of truth, beauty, and goodness wherever – and in whomever – they are found. And they can be found nearly everywhere – in virtually every person, place, situation, or idea that ever existed.
4. Wherever they are found, they can and should be used to point others and ourselves to their source in Jesus.

COMMON GRACE FUNDAMENTALS

I believe that if you frame the fundamentals of the Gospel story well, common grace is unavoidable and essential to the story.

1. The Four-part Gospel: Creation, Fall, Redemption, Restoration

Many contemporary Christian thinkers, including N.T. Wright, Chuck Colson, Nancy Pearcey, Tim Keller, Dallas Willard, and Mike Metzger beautifully lay out the case for the four-part gospel as the proper “grid” for assessing all worldviews, including Christianity. They contend that in the last two hundred years, we have “truncated” the original Gospel. Here’s how Tim Keller sums up this problem and its solution:

Some ... Christians think of the story of salvation like this: Fall, Redemption, Heaven. In this narrative, only saved people have anything of value (people in the world are simply blind and bad), and the purpose of redemption is escape from this world. But if the story of salvation is Creation, Fall, Redemption, and Restoration, then things look different. Non-Christians, created in the image of God, have much wisdom and greatness within them, even though the image is defaced and fallen. Moreover, the purpose of redemption is not to escape the world but to renew it.

The gospel, then, is not just about individual happiness and fulfillment. It is not just a wonderful plan for “my life” but a wonderful plan for the world; it is about the coming of God’s kingdom to renew all things. ²

N.T. Wright says it this way: “The point of Christianity is not ... to go to heaven when you die ... [rather, it is] putting the whole creation to rights.” ³

What does that look like? The Jews call it “shalom” – not just the absence of conflict, but rich human flourishing in all dimensions. The way the world was meant to be. Shalom bookends our existence: it characterizes both the Garden and the eternal City, and so provides the vision for our existence in between.

David Dark says it this way: “The movement called Christianity ... cannot be understood apart from the Jewish concept of shalom. The Christian gospel does not call people to give their mental assent to a certain list of correct propositions, nor does it provide its adherents with a password that will gain them disembodied bliss when they die and the pleasure of confidently awaiting their escape until then.

Shalom is a way of being in the world. The Christian gospel invites us to partake in shalom, to embody shalom, and to anticipate its full realization in the coming kingdom of God.”⁴

We are not going to create full shalom now – only Jesus will do that. But we are called to work for it in our fallen world, in messy, heartbreaking communities of broken people. This task invites the problem of good and requires the solution of common grace.

2. The Imago Dei: Man is originally good.

If the four-part gospel is our grid, then we always start with Creation. So what happened right after God created Adam and Eve?

Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.” So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.” (Genesis 1:26-28)

Before we were sinful, we were made in God’s image – the *imago Dei*. God endowed us with traits that uniquely reflect His Triune nature, including our capacity for relationship, choice, moral sensibility and responsibility. While man has lost *any* ability to save himself, he has not lost the *imago Dei*. It is distorted, but not obliterated. The *imago Dei* is more fundamental than our sin nature – deeper, more original, and more truly human, because it reflects God’s perfect design. It’s what God sees in every human that propels Him to shower us with His common grace.

3. The Creation Mandate: Man’s original job description.

In Genesis 1, God tells Adam and Eve to be fruitful, increase in number, fill the earth, and subdue it. To me this originally seemed like a pretty narrow, straightforward command. Have kids, take care of the garden, and don’t let the animals get out of line. But Christians have always seen it as a more fundamental command, with a scope that applies broadly today. It’s even got a name (three names in fact): the Cultural Commission, the Cultural Mandate, or the Creation Mandate.

The basic idea of the Creation Mandate is that all people have a responsibility to be stewards of the creation – both in the sphere of nature and the sphere of culture, human endeavor, and relationships. Our job, in a sense, is to do whatever we can to shape creation to reflect God’s glory.

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So before and after the Fall⁵, man is an *image-bearer* and a *steward of nature and culture* – he has “dominion” over all of creation. These are his most basic attributes, more original than original sin, and all humans, saved or not, share them. Common grace is God’s mechanism to activate and empower these gifts in His plan to renew all things.

4. The World vs. the Kingdom: The war inside us and around us.

Ever had that conversation about how to be “in the world but not of the world”?

The World is “anything that is in rebellion – stated or unstated – against God.”⁶ It’s any impulse that has an idol (something besides God) at the center. We are not supposed to befriend or love the World (James 4:4, 1 John 2:15-17); but instead we are supposed to enter and influence it (Matthew 5:13-16).

The World is our enemy. But it’s not a particular sinful behavior, specific person or group of people. Ultimately, your fight is not with gay-rights advocates or Islamofascists or crooked politicians or drug dealers or fundamentalists or greedy CEOs. Your fight is with a virus that you – and your political adversary – are both carrying inside you. In the *real* battle, everyone on earth is a prisoner.

And if our allegiance is not to the World, then of course it is to the Kingdom of God – the reign of Christ’s divine love over all things heavenly, cosmic, earthly, and human, past, present, and future. The Kingdom is the Scriptural Anti-World. Jesus talked about it a hundred times.⁷ It was the focus of His model prayer, the central theme of His mission, the first subject of His first major sermon, and the topic of His post-resurrection time with the disciples. His worldview, if you will.

When we pray for the Kingdom to come on earth as it is in heaven, we’re saying that it’s ultimately His responsibility, not ours, to deal with the problem of the World – to defeat the forces against His rule. God tells us to live in the World, like the wheat among tares⁸, and that He will sort it out at the end of time. This frees us to follow Jesus, create culture, reach the nations, make disciples, coexist with the world, and trust His final judgment. God is going to redeem and re-fashion the artillery and battlegrounds of the World into the new heaven and earth – to beat the swords into plowshares. Common grace is central to this task.

Think of a photomosaic – one of those pictures assembled from hundreds of tiny photographs. Every individual photo (just like a

human life) has its own pattern of light and dark. And to create a bright photomosaic, you actually need plenty of individual photos that are almost completely dark. To have beauty, texture, and contrast, you need darkness in the whole and in the individual parts. This, for me, is a picture of the way God redeems brokenness in our fallen world.

5. God's glory: His ultimate purpose.

If the triumph of the Kingdom and the restoration of all creation to shalom are the climax of the story, God's glory is the purpose and reason for the story in the first place. He is glorified and delights in not only the ending, but every plot twist and minor character. Whether He saves or doesn't, reveals or conceals, creates or destroys, he is bringing glory to Himself.

In fact, the salvation and judgment of souls are just two of the things that glorify him. He is interested in, delighted in, and glorified in far more than these. Certainly that's true of the natural creation – He loves a supernova just because He conceived it. Not because it saves some specific person.

In the same way, God takes delight in, and is glorified by, things about the human world, even in relation to people who will never be saved. Richard Mouw, long-time president of Fuller Seminary, says, "I think God takes delight in Benjamin Franklin's wit and in Tiger Woods' putts and in some well-crafted narrative paragraphs in a Salman Rushdie novel, even if these accomplishments are in fact achieved by non-Christian people. And I am convinced that God's delight in these phenomena does not come because they bring the elect to glory and the non-elect to eternal separation from the divine presence. I think God enjoys these things for their own sakes."⁹

For me, this solves the "personal goodness" problem of why some non-Christians can be morally better than some Christians. It's God's common grace, at work in the lives of His creatures, which glorifies Him and serves His purposes.

SEEING COMMON GRACE IN SCRIPTURE

Let's build on these foundations and look deeper at two distinct but connected ways that God interacts with people.

1. God's saving grace that flows from His saving love.
2. God's common grace that flows from His common love.

The Bible is full of references to God's love for people. For example:

God demonstrates his own love for us in this: while we were still sinners, Christ died for us. (Romans 5:8)

For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life. (John 3:16 KJV)

Call that God's "saving love": the kind of love that leads to the Cross, where Christ solves the problem of sin, by living the life and dying the death God requires of us. This is the defining act of "saving grace" – the good news at the heart of the Gospel.

There's a problem, though. God doesn't appear to love all people the same way. He certainly does not save all people. In fact, the Bible also contains references to God's hatred for certain people and groups of people.¹⁰ So, either God loves some people and hates others (cosmic waste) ... or God can righteously have two kinds of love: a common love¹¹ that relates to His *imago Dei* and applies to all people, and a more specific saving love that only applies to some people.

Common love is insufficient to save people, but it does allow them to participate in God's perfect plan to bring about His Kingdom. It results not in saving grace, but common grace, which is not eternal, can be resisted by our hardness of will, and does not fundamentally change the heart.

So what does common grace look like? Theologians talk about it in three categories:

1. Natural blessings and gifts. This is the most basic expression of common grace, and is found in several places in Scripture. For example, Matthew 5:45 says, "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous."

2. The restraining of sin. People don't sin all we could, and we don't experience all the immediate consequences of sin we should.¹² God's common grace restrains this sin (of Christians and non-Christians) and its effects.

3. The ability of all sinners to do good. Listen to Jesus as He questions the rich young ruler in Mark 10:17-18:

As Jesus started on his way, a man ran up to him and fell on his knees before him. "Good teacher," he asked, "what must I do to inherit eternal life?"

“Why do you call me good?” Jesus answered. “No one is good—except God alone.”

Without the saving grace of Christ, we are not capable of producing righteousness, the type of pure “good” that God requires.

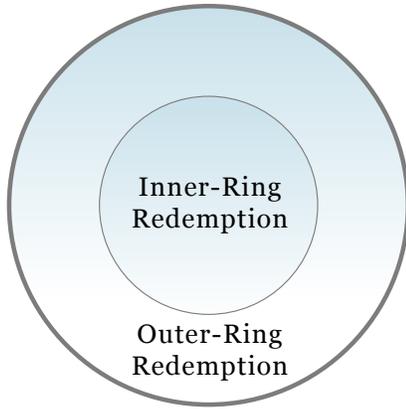
But what about the moral and personal goodness we see? Everybody’s capable of *that*, aren’t they? How does that differ from righteousness? It seems there are not only two kinds of love and two kinds of grace, but also two kinds of goodness.

Think of common grace goodness as conformity to God’s law, though unmotivated by faith – “horizontal” goodness rather than “vertical” goodness. John Calvin beautifully describes this capacity for goodness as a gift from God. He characterizes an unbelieving mind as “though fallen and perverted from its wholeness, is nevertheless clothed and ornamented with God’s excellent gifts”.¹³

This kind of goodness is not enough to save anyone ... but it is real. It’s not an illusion, not a cosmic waste for God’s plans. He will use it for the salvation of some and the judgment of others; to bring shalom, healing and restoration to creation; to reflect His image; and to serve His glory. It is a real response to the natural law, the moral sense of right and wrong and need for God that He has placed within the heart of every person.¹⁴

We don’t have to devalue the gifts of common grace just because they aren’t as exalted as the gifts of saving grace. For if God can delight in that kind of goodness, you and I can too.

Let’s pull all these ideas together – God’s purposes, love, grace, and our response – into a picture of “Inner-Ring Redemption” and “Outer-Ring Redemption”:¹⁵



INNER-RING REDEMPTION

God’s saving love
 fuels God’s saving grace
 by which God works in regenerated people
 to redeem their souls
 as the Kingdom reigns in their hearts
 and which God calls us to participate in
 through the Redemptive Mandate (a.k.a. Great Commission)
 all for His glory

OUTER-RING REDEMPTION

God’s common love
 fuels God’s common grace
 by which God works through all people
 to redeem entire cultures
 as the Kingdom reigns over creation
 and which God calls us to participate in
 through the Creation Mandate (a.k.a. Cultural Commission)
 all for His glory

LIVING COMMON GRACE

Let’s apply common grace and outer-ring redemption in two areas: personal relationships and broader cultural engagement.

Common grace in personal relationships

How does common grace change the way we interact with unbelievers?

It’s axiomatic in contemporary Christian circles that most people need “authentic relationships” before they are open to the Gospel. And common grace is the only basis for authentic relationships with non-Christians.

You can truly love unbelievers for their own sake. It’s axiomatic in contemporary Christian circles that most people need “authentic relationships” before they are open to the Gospel. And common grace is the only basis for authentic relationships with non-Christians. It’s the only way you can love someone for their own sake, which means you’d love them even if you *knew* they wouldn’t be next to you in heaven. In doing so, you are simply following God’s common grace pattern of merciful love for all who bear His image. You earn the privilege to be moral without being a moralist, exercise judgment without being judgmental, and insist on fundamentals without being a fundamentalist.

Outside of common grace, when you encounter an unbeliever, you may hate her, pity her, or want to possess her; but you cannot love her.

Bob Lupton sees this problem anew when he finds himself the target of door-to-door evangelism by a pair of Jehovah's Witnesses: "I still resent being treated as a lost soul and not valued as a neighbor ... perhaps if I sensed that the person at my door had a genuine interest in me, not as a disembodied soul or a prospective recruit or a decision to be tallied, but in me as a human being, I might feel somewhat more receptive."¹⁶

Common grace helps you offer a richer apologetic. I remember a conversation with a friend about ten years ago. He asked me point-blank if my Christianity meant I believed there was nothing good in him. I panicked because I'd been taught the answer was yes – that everything in him was evil. I had literally just heard of common grace somewhere and hardly understood anything about it – but I threw it out there and said that it meant he wasn't all bad. I got off easy that day ... but the memory of that experience made me start investigating common grace many years later. He later came to Christ, by the way, though from an apologist's perspective I think I did everything else wrong.

We can affirm the "good" an unbeliever experiences as real good, not an illusion – and can say with confidence that this good comes from God.

I hope I would do better today, because the intertwined stories of inner-ring and outer-ring redemption are more profound and compelling than when they are separated. We can affirm the "good" an unbeliever experiences as real good, not an illusion – and can say with confidence that this good comes from God. Properly balanced, this view points *toward* our need for saving grace, not away from it.

Common grace in cultural engagement

How does common grace inform the way we approach our culture?

You can truly love culture for its own sake. If you're operating from common grace, you can love and appreciate something non-Christian for its own sake. You can appreciate (or make) great art whether or not it was made by, for, or about Christians. You can work for your community or justice or healing because these things reflect God's shalom. You can be committed without reservation to a job outside professional ministry because you won't be trapped in the myth of the "secular/sacred divide."

Without common grace, you may be able to *assault* the culture with the truth of the Gospel – but you won't be able to *create* or *cultivate* culture, which are the only ways to change it.¹⁷

My friends Josh Jackson and Nick Purdy started a little company several years ago to celebrate "signs of life in music, film, and culture." It's now known as *Paste Magazine*, one of the finest cultural products out there, Christian or otherwise. They set out

to spotlight the good, the true, and the beautiful, whatever its source, for whoever was interested. Apart from a few notable lapses in judgment (they carried my last record in their online store, for example), they've proven two things: that there is a near-inexhaustible supply of the good, the true, and the beautiful in popular culture; and that hundreds of thousands of non-Christians care about it. The magazine is rolling in secular awards, and you know why? It's because they actually love the culture they are celebrating. They don't think of it as a mission field. *They really love it for its own sake.* If they didn't, only the Christians would read the magazine and give them awards.

Common grace gives sound Biblical roots to cultural engagement. There's a long, rich tradition of Christians *separating* from culture, with its favorite Bible passages, theology, logic, sentiments, heroes, enemies, cautionary tales, strawmen, and vision of society. And there's a similar tradition of Christians *engaging* in culture, with its own version of all the same things. Both streams of thought go back to the early days of the church, and both, I believe, are originally rooted in an honest desire to follow the truth of Christ faithfully.

Many Christians feel themselves stuck in the middle. Maybe you see how bad the culture out there is, but you still don't want to retreat from it. You may be conservative Biblically, but you can't figure out why homeless shelters, AIDS relief, community redevelopment, or crisis pregnancy centers are a waste of your time. You know you're supposed to be discerning about what you watch, but you actually find that a lot of those "secular" films actually seem to strengthen your faith, not weaken it.

The problem of good, right?

The doctrine of common grace plays a brilliant ambassadorial role in this divide. Why? Because it makes the Biblically faithful case for cultural engagement without neutering the Gospel. It acknowledges the depth of our sin, our need for the Cross, our call to evangelism, the reality of spiritual warfare, our capacity for self-deception about our motives, the seductive dangers of competing worldviews, and our desperate need for discernment.

At the same time, I'm reminded that the place where the concepts of shalom, the Creation Mandate, and common grace intersect is very large. Common grace helps us to acknowledge that there are times to embrace culture warmly, and times to be in stark, prophetic opposition to it. And the only durable, Biblical way to do both is to see culture through the lens of common grace.

Common grace allows us to see the Gospel in unlikely places. What common grace has to say about the arts could fill a book. The good news is that most of that book has been written elsewhere. But let me add a few comments.

I'm encouraged by the emphasis in the Christian subculture on the idea of *discernment*. We've realized there is no such thing as a neutral piece of art or entertainment – that everything carries a worldview. We're learning how to avoid not just wrong *acts* (no sex, no violence, no bad language, etc.) but also wrong *ideas* (bad worldviews, anti-redemptive values, no negative portrayals of Christian characters, etc.)

That's a good start, but we only do half the job, because we only teach *negative* discernment. Our whole paradigm is about how tightly to draw the boundaries of protection, of saying “no.” I believe it's essential to have *positive* discernment too: to be able to say an enthusiastic “yes” to entertainment that is transcendent, pointing me to my need for Christ, causing me to love my neighbor more. Art that may or may not have a Christian creator or a Christian theme, but that has a Christian *effect*.

How about a new category of art that reveals “the Gospel in unlikely places?” First, there are non-Christian artists reflecting the Gospel unwittingly, or “seekingly” – I think of God-haunted artists like M. Night Shyamalan, P.T. Anderson, Conor Oberst of Bright Eyes, and Sam Beam of Iron & Wine.

As an example, I think of *The Shawshank Redemption*, which is tied for the #1 highest-rated film of all time on imdb.com, with by far the highest number of people voting for it as a favorite film. Here is a story saturated in common grace in the midst of evil, written by Stephen King, who was not a confessing Christian the last time I checked. Why does this story have so much power and touch people so deeply, if not for the fact that it taps a deep, unspoken reservoir of passion about the dignity of the *imago Dei*?

Second is the powerful renaissance of Christian artists who tell the story of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration using language, forms, and images to *show* the Gospel rather than to preach it. Who know that the best Christian art may not be about Christians or for Christians, use Christian language, or address typical Christian issues – what Derek Webb calls “explicit art.” In the music world, beyond the usual suspects in this category, such as U2 and Sufjan Stevens, check out Bruce Cockburn, Buddy and Julie Miller, Denison Witmer, Kate York, Mindy Smith, Over the Rhine, or Sam Phillips.

T Bone Burnett says, “You can write about the light, or you can write about what you see by the light.”

As T Bone Burnett says, “You can write about the light, or you can write about what you see by the light.” And thanks to God’s common grace, there are a million surfaces reflecting that light.

The daily application of common grace is simple:

1. *Find the good*, the true, and the beautiful wherever it exists in the world. This can be in a person, a work of art, an organization, an interaction, a city, your job, you name it.
2. *Point to its source in Christ*. This can be through a silent prayer of thanksgiving, a bold evangelistic proclamation, or anything in between.

Find the good, point to Christ. Repeat.

THE DANGERS OF COMMON GRACE

Okay, admit it. Common grace makes you nervous.

In fact, your mind probably keeps coming back to the classic “slippery slope” argument, which goes something like this: God calls us to be holy. He cannot abide sin. If you crack open the door to common grace, then inevitably you will start to believe that people can be saved by their own goodness. And then you will stop trying to reach the unsaved. So common grace is just a fancy way of sneaking the social gospel in through the side door. An attempt to be in the world *and* of the world.

Frankly, some of these are valid concerns. Anything that sees the good outside Jesus can shrink the real story of sin and make an affront to the Cross. I know that for me, common grace tempts me to tell myself all those lies about evangelism: it’s not my spiritual gift, I share the Gospel in other ways, that’s not how postmoderns intersect with God’s story. You know the list.

So how do we avoid the dangers of making too big a deal of common grace? We need “guardrails” of solid theology to protect us, many of which we’ve touched on here.¹⁸ Remember, we need both the Creation and Redemptive Mandates; otherwise, we lose something essential about the goodness of *creation*, the depth of our *fall*, the Cross that brings *redemption*, or the *restoration* of the kingdom.

*If you lose the emphasis on [individual] conversion... you lose the power of the gospel for personal transformation. You will not work sacrificially, joyfully, and non-paternalistically for justice. If you lose the emphasis on the corporate—on the kingdom—you lose the power of the gospel for cultural transformation.*¹⁹

To recap what common grace does and doesn't say:

WHAT COMMON GRACE SAYS	WHAT IT DOESN'T SAY
Man is originally good, made in the image of God	Man's goodness can save him
God loves the world	God loves everyone the same
We cannot withdraw from culture	We can withdraw from evangelism
My enemy is not a person	We don't have to fight the enemies of the world, the flesh, and the devil
The world is full of the good	It's all good
Common grace is a great gift of life	Common grace is sufficient for life

GOD'S SECOND GREATEST GIFT

In my favorite book on common grace, *He Shines in All That's Fair*, Richard Mouw observes that understanding common grace saved his sanity. I feel exactly the same. Theological messiness of any kind may make me jittery; but any other answer to the problem of good makes me implode. And as Mouw goes on to say, messiness "will eventually bring us to a humble acknowledgment of the divine mysteries."²⁰

Plus, when I look at the lives of people I admire, they appear saturated in common grace – loving the good, the true, and the beautiful wherever it's to be found. Not an over-intellectual or over-spiritualized life, but one that is specific, rooted, effective, and yet still transcendent. Getting common grace into your bloodstream seems to make you love God more and your neighbor as yourself.

And I am learning to see God's grace everywhere. I love to see His grace in the decision to spike the whole punchbowl with His gospel, His truth, and His beauty. As 1 Timothy 4:4-5 reminds us, "For everything God created is good, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, because it is consecrated by the word of God and prayer."

Leaning into common grace is not making me a liberal or a utopian. It's giving me a higher view of the Gospel, holiness, righteousness,

the role of the church, and the task of evangelism. It is simply a full embrace of James's observation that "every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights."²¹ In fact, when you start to get common grace, you'll become less afraid of the non-Christianity *outside* you and more concerned about the non-Christianity *inside* you. This is an essential first step towards a Biblical hope for the church's task of cultural renewal.

Yes, God's greatest gift to humanity – the Cross, the ultimate sacrifice, the ultimate expression of saving grace – answers the number one question of humanity, the problem of cosmic and personal evil. And common grace, God's second greatest gift to humanity, the answer to the problem of cosmic and personal good, is just as close beside you – as close as the gravity that keeps you from sliding off the earth. May you learn to receive both kinds of God's love, embrace both kinds of God's grace, and celebrate both kinds of God's goodness wherever you find them. May grace begin to replace a fear you couldn't defend, with a hope you cannot resist.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Do you have a personal story where you have experienced common grace from the life of a non-Christian?

Kauffmann says that common grace probably makes you nervous. Is that true for you? Why do you think that is?

Think over the last week in your life. Where did you see good? In what way could you have pointed to its source?

Have you ever struggled with how to “love” a non-Christian? How does common grace help you with that struggle?

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End Notes

¹ Title of a new book by Dave Kinnaman and Gabe Lyons, releasing October 2007 from the Fermi Project.

² Tim Keller essay, *Ministry in the New Global Culture of Major City-Centers*.

³ N.T. Wright, *Simply Christian*, (Harper San Francisco, 2006), p. 217.

⁴ David Dark, *Everyday Apocalypse* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2002).

⁵ Notice that God reaffirms the Creation Mandate in Genesis 9 – after sin, and after the great flood. So it doesn't apply only to Adam and Eve in the garden. It still holds.

⁶ Archie Parrish, *Improve Your Prayer Life* (Atlanta: Serve International, 2002.).

⁷ I'm indebted for these points to a mentor and friend, Jack Alexander, who has made the Kingdom the centerpiece of his life message.

⁸ The parable of the wheat and the tares is found in Matthew 13:24-30.

⁹ Mouw, *He Shines in All That's Fair*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), p. 36.

¹⁰ For some examples, check out Leviticus 20:23, Psalm 5:5, Proverbs 6:16-19, Hosea 9:15, Matthew 7:23, Matthew 25:41.

¹¹ For example, see Psalm 145:9.

¹² There are only a few times in Scripture where people's lives were demanded of them immediately upon committing a sin. Otherwise, God restrains His wrath.

¹³ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 2.2.15.

¹⁴ See Romans 1.

¹⁵ These are my terms, but they are certainly inspired by others,

particularly Chuck Colson and Nancy Pearcey, in their great book *How Now Shall We Live?* (Wheaton: Tyndale House, 1999.)

¹⁶ Bob Lupton, *Urban Perspectives* newsletter.

¹⁷ I love the way Andy Crouch discusses this idea in his essay “What’s Your Posture?” published in the Catalyst Groupzine: The Culture Issue 2006.

¹⁸ Understand that common grace is as much of a “conservative” idea as a liberal one. Though the Reformers coined the phrase “common grace” in the 16th and 17th centuries, it has been the mainstream “conservative” view over the centuries. In fact, its opposition was stronger in the 20th century than at any other time in history.

¹⁹ Keller, *ibid.*

²⁰ Mouw, p. 87.

²¹ James 1:17

Cover Art: Pierre-August Renoir, 1841-1919, “Madame Monet auf dem Divan”, 1872. The Yorck Project, Impressionist paintings.