



Common And Special Grace

God's grace is manifested in two ways: common and special grace. Common grace is the grace shown by the Creator to and for His creation. This "common" grace is given regardless of the recipient's awareness and acceptance of it. Special grace is bestowed upon those who enter into a personal relationship to the Creator through Jesus Christ. Those who are ambassadors for Christ must be about both graces. The former grace often opens the door for the latter grace.

What do the pituitary gland, Milton's "Paradise Lost" and the parking meter person have in common—other than being alliterative voiceless bilabials? They all are expressions of what is theologically known as "common grace"; i.e., the Creator's expressions of divine favor (grace) to and for his Creation. What do the Gospel, the Holy Spirit, and the Church share in common? They all are expressions of what is theologically known as "special grace": God's special and divine favor bestowed on anyone who would respond personally to him.

Common Grace

The Pituitary Gland

When was the last time you thought about your pituitary gland—that peanut sized "master gland" that hangs at the base of your brain near the center of your skull and regulates your body's growth as well as a number of vital bodily functions? The pituitary gland is an example of the first and most basic expression of common grace: the wildly excessive and indiscriminate life sustaining favor of God to all humankind (and every other "kind" for that matter) as seen through his provision of such common, elemental things as sun and rain. In fact, this aspect of God's grace is so common that we take it for granted because of its 24/7, "3-D, digital surround sound" nature. Whenever we speak of grace being "uncommon" we are almost invariably making reference to ourselves and not to God.

Milton's "Paradise Lost"

After reading my friend's radio adaptation of Milton's classic poem, I found myself transported to the burning borders of heaven and hell. The power of Milton's words (and my friend's editorial skill) to forge powerful images of beauty and brutality in one's mind is an example of the second expression of common grace: the tendency for humankind not only to be about the avoidance (or at least an awareness) of "wrongness" and ugliness but also to be about the appreciation and expression of "rightness" and beauty in its many forms. How is that possible for a fallen people in a fallen world? Although the children of Adam and Eve have lost paradise, its memory still echoes within their souls and finds expression in their attempts to recapture paradise lost through myriad philanthropic endeavors such as the Arts, arboretums, and education. God's image within humankind may have been marred but it hasn't been removed.

The Parking Meter Person

Okay, the pituitary gland and Paradise Lost make some sense, but the parking meter person? What gives? The parking meter person is the third expression of common grace: humankind's propensity to set up systems of law and order. Imagine if there were no parking meter persons in a crowded city. Paradise regained? For all our minor complaints at getting parking tickets or towed vehicles, we would all be experiencing minor strokes if our city streets were totally clogged at any hour of the day because folk didn't hesitate to park their cars wherever they wanted to because they knew bad consequences did not follow wrong actions. This basic idea of restraint because of unwelcomed repercussions can be extended to every facet of a civilized country. It's what keeps humanity from totally wiping itself off the face of the planet. All would agree that there are no perfect forms of human government. So, too, most would agree that without some degree of human government human existence would be worse off. To some, order destroys freedom, but if history has rubbed our face in anything it's the cyclical pattern of destruction that results from unrestricted freedom and the tyrannical forms of order that rise to meet it.

Special Grace

Much has been (and should be) said about special grace, at least within most "Christian" circles. In a nutshell, special grace (e.g., the lasting fruit of the Gospel, the indwelling power of the Holy Spirit, entrance into the body of Christ, etc.) flows to all who would receive it. We at CGM believe that special grace is bestowed on anyone who wishes to enter into a personal relationship with the God of the universe and to live with, by and for him.

Of Coins and Composite Creatures

Some folk see common and special grace as two separate expressions of grace; we see them as the "head" and "tail" of the same coin. In Genesis we are told that we humans came from the dust of the earth, and thus there is a natural, material element to our being. Secondly, we are told that God "breathed" life into us, creating us in his own image. Thus, there is a supernatural, spiritual element to our being. These two elements, material and spiritual, were perfectly wedded in Eden; however, after the "fall" a schism arose between the two. Although food would still be provided (with our contribution of toil and sweat) for the sustenance of the body, no longer would God's Spirit be in communion with our spirit. From that point forward, common grace would be given freely, but special grace would have to be freely chosen. Thus, in our experience of these two sides of Grace, common grace always precedes special grace. Before we enter the family of God, we enter the family of the Goddards, Gonzalezes, Gorbachevs or Gotos (or whatever your family name happens to be). Before we see the light of heaven, we see the light of day. Before we taste the fruit from the tree of life, we taste the fruit from the trees of DelMonte and Chiquita. Before we inhabit the "mansions" of heaven, we must dwell in our modest abodes here on earth.

An Unbalanced Coin?

There are those who would say, “Special grace is all that matters; i.e., getting people saved. This common grace thing is the invention of well meaning yet totally misguided left-wing liberals who let their bleeding hearts rule their theologically empty heads. Sure, God provides the sun and rain, but that’s nothing compared to the provision of his Son. The spirit is everything. The flesh profits nothing. No one was, is, or ever will be saved by common grace. Only special grace can save a soul!” True, no one can be saved by common grace alone. But neither can anyone be saved by special grace alone. No one was ever saved by common grace alone, but, we argue, no one was, is or ever will be saved without it. Yes, the Spirit gives birth to spirit, but a person in order to enter heaven must be born before he can be born again. We believe that it is the very commonness of common grace that blinds us to this simple yet critical truth. We fail to see that without common grace, special grace would be null and void. Why? Because without common grace (i.e., without the sun, rain, air, food, etc.) everyone and every living thing would be nixed, nothing, nada; i.e., dead. Now if everything and everyone is dead, who would be around to respond to God’s special grace? Not only would there be nobody around to receive it, there wouldn’t be anyone around to proclaim it. God is not only concerned about the hereafter; he’s also concerned about the here and now. Both matter and spirit matter to God.

Like Father Like Son

Jesus said that if anyone has seen him he has seen the Father; i.e., Jesus came to show “up close and personal” his Father’s heart. By looking at the way Jesus did things, we get a picture of how the Father had always been doing things for his creation since the genesis of all things. When tempted by the devil in the desert to turn stones into bread, Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 8:3: “It is written: ‘Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God.’” Jesus wasn’t saying that humankind doesn’t need bread (i.e., food) to live; he was saying that bread alone can’t sustain all that a human being is. And so we see Jesus offering loaves of bread to five thousand men along with their families on a field of grass to satisfy the hunger of their bodies, and we also see Jesus as the Word of God offering himself as the Bread of Life to five billion plus people in the world to satisfy the hunger of their souls. We see Jesus not only helping a paralytic to take up his mat and walk home; we also see him taking up the paralytic’s sin so that one day he can be taken up to his eternal home. We see Jesus turning water into wine to make the heart merry, and we also see him shedding his blood on the cross to make the heart pure. We see Jesus not only giving to Caesar what was Caesar’s, but to God what was God’s. Jesus was about common and special grace because his Father was about common and special grace.

Two Terrible Tendencies

The church has always known about and practiced common and special grace. However, history reveals that the church has had a difficult time with balancing both expressions. One tendency has been to use common grace as a ruse to reel in the unregenerate: “You will be served a hot meal after brother Smith preaches the Gospel.” There are untold thousands who have been

"saved" more than once in order to get a hot meal or a place to lay their weary heads. This mercenary approach to sharing the Gospel goes against the heart of our Lord. God allows sun and rain to shine and fall on the righteous and unrighteous regardless of their response to (or even awareness of) him. God never says, "Let's see...Okay, no sun or rain for Mr. Smith today. he's not a believer yet." Another tendency is to be about a one-sided coin. To be about the body while neglecting the soul produces "hollow" men and women, "having a form of godliness but denying the power thereof." (2 Tim. 3:5) To be about the soul while neglecting the body produces hypocritical Gnostics (i.e., flesh haters) whose faith and love are dead: "If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?" (1 John 3:15)

Like Son Like Us

How should we, who believe in the Son, then live? Simple. We must be about expressing both sides of the coin of grace. In our churches, in our organizations, in our institutions, in our individual lives we need to be about the pituitary gland, Paradise Lost and the parking meter person; i.e., we need to feed the hungry, heal the sick, provide for the poor; we need to create beauty and express joy through art and architecture, through education and example; we need to be law abiding citizens who give to Caesar what is Caesar's, who are involved in the "law and order" of our countries. We also need to be about the Word of God who alone can satisfy the emptiness of the human soul; we need to listen and learn from the lost among us, proclaiming the Gospel while living it; we need to show the heart of our Lord by allowing him to live in and through us; we need to allow our brokenness to be a contact point with the world's brokenness. Then we will truly be sons and daughters of our Father in heaven.