

Uncommon Grace

"that you may be sons of your Father 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 5:45 NKJV)

The context of this verse set in the sermon on the mount (Mt. 5-7) is that of doing good toward all, not just our friends and family. It is used by many to wrongly develop a doctrine of so-called common grace, which is shown to all mankind as opposed to a special grace that brings salvation to the elect. I do not think this is the correct application of the verse nor that common grace as it is most widely understood exists. We attempt to reduce to the human level of understanding that which being of God will not fit into our little theological boxes.

The Children's Catechism of the old Southern Presbyterian Church (PCUS) defines covenant as an agreement between two or more people. While most understand the concept of an asymmetrical covenant, few can relate covenant theology correctly and seem invariably equate being in the covenant family as being of the elect.

God is sovereign and has spoken in covenant terminology. The covenant of God is with all mankind from the beginning. That is the election has nothing to do with being in the covenant. God is the superior and has said this is the deal, keep my commandments and know blessings, break my commandments and know cursing. This is aside from the election! In this sense the covenant is not a choice, we all are obligated by the command of God as the Sovereign to keep the covenant. The covenant then becomes a place of blessing for all who obey God.

In the covenant we have both "saved" and unsaved" persons. For the elect, being enabled by the Spirit of God the covenant remains a place of blessing, with an assurance of its final completion in our behalf with the finished work of our Lord Jesus Christ. For the non-elect it becomes a place of testing. A test they cannot in and of themselves keep, and though not by eternal decree as in double predestination as some are want to call it, a hard fact that apart from Christ none would be saved, for none can perfectly keep the covenant which was never intended of God to be the way, or another way of eternal salvation. The covenant is the schoolroom, the law of God the school teacher.

This is why the Reformed church can baptize infants, and call it a sign and seal of entry into the covenant of grace. The child technically is already in the covenant at large and is already in the covenant by reason of being born into a covenant family. The child's parents then as this family, and in a larger sense the church can fulfill the obedience to said covenant on behalf of the child until such time as they (if elect) can embrace the Lord personally as their Savior.

There are those that argue there is no connection between circumcision and baptism. While I would differ with them, for the sake of argument, have it their way. Yet, it remains a fact both are signs of agreement by the parents that they will raise the child as a member of the covenant family of God.

Salvation is unconditional, and by grace alone though faith given by God in Jesus Christ. This is true in both Testaments. The covenant of grace extends from eternity past to present and beyond. While some are of a mind to have it under two dispensations, one of works and the other of grace, I choose to call it one, called grace, because it was of grace that God extended any covenant to man at all. I see no value in having all the intermediate covenants with different personages in the Old Testament, nor do I see them as different covenants, but rather the further revelation of what was the intent of God from the beginning. The original covenant was not fulfilled nor done away with, but is carried forward from generation to generation with further explanation (revelation) by God to the created in calling to remembrance that original covenant, not a new or even renewal of that covenant.

Common grace then does not exist as we are prone to understand it, whereby God gives gifts and shows grace to those that are not elect. *"But He answered and said, 'It is not good to take the children's bread and throw it to the little dogs. 'And she said, 'Yes, Lord, yet even the little dogs eat the crumbs which fall from their masters' table'"* (Matthew 15:26-27 NKJV). Here is the explanation of that which men call common grace! It is but the overflow of blessings bestowed by God on the elect. If we use a Christian farmer who has a 100 acre farm in a perfect square as an example, and understand that while God can work above or outside natural laws He created, He normally follows this law. Thus while God could send a perfect 100 acre cloud and pour the rains upon the land of the Christian farmer alone, God will in all probability send rain to the area in general so that those around the Christian farmer are blessed also with both the early and latter rains. God has showed no grace, common or otherwise to the non-elect, He has kept His promise and blessed the believer who obeys His commandments.

In the covenant with mankind, God honors those who obey Him. In other words there are blessings for being in community with the elect. Consider Nineveh and the prophet Jonah. There is no reason whatsoever to consider the first of these people who repented from their evil ways as being of the elect and knowing eternal salvation. We can readily see that because they obeyed God, He did not pour out His wrath and destroy that horrible nation for 100 years. The person who is willing to faithfully serve in the family (church) and obey God will know this overflow of blessing and the protective hedge in the staying of the hand of God in wrath and destruction, and the withholding of the ability of Satanic attacks to destroy the fruit of their labors in this life. God must have elected a person before the foundation of the world and in His time given the Holy Spirit of regeneration to a person for them to be of the covenant and in the Lamb's book of life.

God exists in such perfection and unity we cannot begin to understand such holiness. There can be no trace of contradiction nor of evil in God. There can be no division whatsoever in any of the perfections of God. Thus when we speak of grace it must be total. There cannot be a greater or lesser, nor a difference as with the explanation we all use to explain how there are different words for love and love can exist on several planes. Thus the smallest touch of God's grace is the same as the fullness of the same and the person so receiving will be saved forever.

Many want to equate grace and love in this context and point that God so loved the world, and the Reformed perspective shows clearly God didn't choose all the world, so there are differences of love bestowed. No! This is not true.

Calvin at places used his own paraphrases in trying to get across the understanding of the meaning of the Word of God. Some versions of the Bible are translated in what is known as dynamic equivalence in an attempt to move the meaning to the present and maintain the original meaning of a word. Others stick to a literal word for word rendering in an attempt to maintain the original word even at the expense of understanding. I believe it is a mixture of these techniques that brings to us the Word as God would have it understood and applied. This creates a spiritual and subjective place no scholar will dare to live. Yet it is by the Spirit alone we will understand what God has revealed in His Word to us.

In 1 Cor. 13 we find some versions use the word "*charity*" and others the word "*love*" to translate '*agape*' which is the heart of this whole chapter. Which is correct? In English I believe the word charity is the only way to begin to really understand what God is revealing to us. Charity speaks of grace and benevolence as God has shown to us, and in a way no nuance of the word love can begin to reach. In the New Testament we find '*agape*' translated love eighty-six times and charity twenty-seven times, at the choice of the translator. In the Geneva and its forerunners in the Tyndale tradition as well as the King James version we find this same division of choice and the one I believe that best reveals to us what God would have us to understand as His meaning and our application of these words.

In the passage above from the sermon on the mount we find a different Greek word used (*agapo*) which is translated love one hundred thirty-five times and beloved seven times. I differ somewhat here and believe I can use both Greek words in the meaning of charity without losing the meaning of the text.

The amateurish translation attempts aside, I believe it is the sense of the text and the meaning of God that we are show "*charity*" or benevolence toward our enemies, not the overt actions we as men would tie to love. This speaks to an attitude of heart then that leads to godly actions in being gracious toward all, not the bestowing grace upon all. Thus I can be courteous and not bring riling accusation against any, leaving the rebuking and judgment to God (Jude 1:9). This then is a condition of the soul, not an overt action of the mind or intellect alone as in a legalistic performance that will flow naturally from the regenerated heart, but cannot be called forth from the heart of man without the presence of the Holy Spirit.

God being obedient to His own laws as revealed to men then shows the same charity or benevolence toward all mankind and extends to them the blessings bestowed on the beloved (elect) because of the presence of the beloved, not as a direct gift to the non-elect. Yet both are still under obligation of the covenant.

As Joshua drew the line in the sand and proclaimed this day he and his household would serve God, in obedience to God's law speak of obedience to the covenant, not salvation,

for no man has ever chosen God, but God chose some men. The covenant is the place of blessing and testing, election is a position within the covenant and fulfillment of the testing in Christ's completed work.

We might use the analogy of a hedge of briars around a vineyard as the protection then of being obedient to God. In this picture obedience is a constant tending to the hedge that holds out the small animals of the outer world that would devour and spoil the fruit of the vineyard. Disobedience and failure to maintain the hedge allows holes to appear and the wild animals to begin to nibble at the fruit, and if the disobedience continues a further deterioration of the hedge until the outer world devours all in the vineyard, both fruit and keeper.

Another way we might picture this is as individuals we have God's hands cupped around us with fingers interlaced. As we are obedient to God we find this place of resting and blessing, protected from the evils of worldly life. As we are disobedient God opens the fingers more or less as required for our good at the moment and allows the evil one to interfere with our rest and peace.

This doesn't deny there is a natural process in effect which means that illnesses and mishaps come, and these have nothing to do with the opening of the protection of God's hand, but life in this temporal world. It does say that much of the sickness and mishaps could be avoided if we are obedient to God. Paul says as much in dealing with the Lord's table where we read some are sick and have even died for the profaning of the table. Sin has two prices, one in the eternal where being judged by our deeds we gain or lose heavenly rewards (crowns). The other side of this coin in the world is human misery. Sin is paid for today in human misery!

In conclusion, God is so awesome that He exceeds anything the mind of man can even dream of. In pouring out His love and grace on His chosen (elect), of which the most meager share results in blessings untold for those in close proximity to the beloved of God. We see this truth though somewhat veiled in the ten commandments where we read that God visits the iniquities of the fathers to the third and fourth generation, but bestows mercy upon thousands of those that love Him. A depth of the sin transcending generations, not in punishment to another for the sin of the father, but in withholding blessings. Thus we see the child of an abusive family become an abuser of his own family later. In contrast to this we see the picture of a world at peace because of the "charity" shown to all by the Christian in their midst. No promise of future blessing as such, but a breadth of uncommon grace around all near to a true believer whom Christ says will obey His commandments.

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