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Is There a Biblical Doctrine of Common Grace?

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'Common Grace' is a term used to describe a general goodness of God *to* all men and a common goodness inspired by God *in* men, apart from his special grace in Christ. Several questions arise from this formulation of the doctrine. Is 'grace' the right word to describe it? Does the Bible acknowledge God's goodness to all men, or a goodness in men apart from the grace of God in Christ? If so, is that goodness acceptable to God apart from justifying grace?

On the question of the grace of God to all men, this paper maintains that God's grace is particular, but God's goodness is general. On the question of non-Christian goodness, it is maintained that there is a common goodness in men, which is the surviving image of their Creator; but that all their good works are perverted to self-centred (or ? man-centred, —C.G.M.) aims, and do not amount to a goodness which is acceptable in God's judgment. Nevertheless, the writer believes it is important that Christians should acknowledge this goodness in other men.

God's Grace is Particular and not Common

The description 'common grace' is scarcely appropriate to what it is intended to describe. In both Testaments, God's grace is justifying grace, which according to the New Testament, is revealed in Christ. It is received on repentance and faith. It is individual and elective.

God's grace is in Christ (Rom. 5: 15), inseparable from his redemption and revelation (John 1: 14, 17; Acts 15: 11; Rom. 1: 5; 3: 24; 5: 2, 15, 17, 21; 1 Cor. 1: 4; Eph. 1: 7; 2: 7; 1 Tim. 1: 4; 2 Pet. 3: 18). Peter emphasises to his readers that 'the grace of God in Christ' to which they have been called (1 Pet. 5: 10) is 'the true grace of God' (v. 12). God's grace is inseparable from the response of faith (Acts 18: 27; Rom. 4: 16; Eph. 2: 8) to the word of the gospel (Acts 4: 33; 11: 23; 14: 3; 20: 24, 32; Col. 1: 6; 2 Tim. 1: 9).

In the Old Testament, the grace or favour of God is 'found' and 'shown' in personal relationships with God (cf 1 Cor. 15: 10; 1 Tim. 1: 14 in NT) and it is elective (Ex. 33: 19). In the New Testament, it is 'given to each' personally (Rom. 12: 6; Eph. 4: 7).

Common goodness has been ascribed to the grace of God because it is not found equally in all men, just as we sometimes ascribe the material gifts to the grace of God because they are not equally distributed among all men, and those who receive abundance are not, in general, any more deserving than those who go in want. But we cannot justly speak of anyone's being deserving or undeserving of the gift of goodness.

A scriptural foundation for this use of the term is sometimes found in the phrase 'the grace of life' in 1 Peter 3: 7; the continuance of human life is by the grace of God to undeserving Adam and his heirs. But what is continued is God's original goodness in creation.

God's general goodness

Even if 'common grace' is not the right term for it, there is clear scriptural evidence of God's general Fatherhood, love, and goodness. God's general Fatherhood is commonly based on Mal. 2: 10, but that verse actually refers to his fatherly relation to the covenant people which he had created. However, according to Paul, God is the Father (*pater*) from whom every fatherhood (*patria*) derives (Eph. 3: 14f), 'the Father, from whom are all things' (1 Cor. 8: 6) 'the Father of all, above all, and in all and through all' (Eph. 4: 6). This last verse has particular reference to 'all' the members of the Body (4: 4), but, in the light of 3: 14f., it may be extended to include God's Fatherhood of all things. This is no more than to say that all things and all men (1 Cor. 8: 6) have their being from him.

God's general love and goodness, to both the evil and the good, the just and the unjust, is linked with his Fatherhood, and made the basis for Jesus's exhortation to his disciples to love their enemies, to be sons of their heavenly Father in this way, and so to be perfect as their heavenly Father is perfect (Matt. 5: 44-48).

The Goodness of the Created Order

God's universal goodness is the goodness with which he creates and sustains the universe and all things within it (Psa. 33: 4-9). God is good in creating, and what He creates is good (Gen. 1: 31), and remains good in spite of abuse (1 Tim. 4: 3f.). The will to worship, to rule, to achieve, and to love is God-given. If men do not worship God, they worship idols of their own fabrication (Rom. 1: 25); but, since Cain and Abel (Gen. 4), men have worshipped. God gave man the mandate to rule, and the urge to achieve the purpose for which he was created (Gen. 1: 26, 28; cf. Psa. 8: 6), and that purpose is fulfilled in Christ (Phil. 3: 7-14; Eph. 4: 13). The ground of conjugal love is given in Gen. 2: 23f.

But this will to worship, to rule, to achieve and to love is perverted to idolatry (Rom. 1: 25), to tyranny, to pride and self-sufficiency, and to lust or affections contrary to God's ordinance (Rom. 1: 26f.). That tyranny is a perversion of what is basically good, viz. God's ordinance of government (Rom. 13: 1), is evident from the teaching of submission to unjust punishment (1 Peter 2: 18), because of the honour which is due to governors (2: 13-17). In consequence of the perversion of the will to achieve, man's work, which God ordained (Gen. 2: 5) and still ordains (1 Thess. 4: 11; 2 Thess. 3: 6-12), became burdensome toil (Gen. 3: 17): and in consequence of the perversion of the will to love, woman's labour in childbirth, which can still be sanctified labour dedicated to God (1 Tim. 2: 15) became pain (Gen. 3: 16).

These ordinances of God (worship, government, work, marriage) are given for the preservation of mankind as a whole. The preservation of mankind through work and marriage requires no demonstration. Temporal justice and order are preserved through government. Lastly, but fundamentally, religion is the motivating force of people's obedience: among the Hebrew people, the sanction of the levitical regulations for civil justice and social morality was the repeated 'I am the Lord your God' with the implication 'You shall be holy; for I the Lord your God am holy'. (Lev. 19: 2). The pagan religions sanctioned a morality of a lesser order which, even at its lowest, still excluded the worst form of immorality (1 Cor. 5: 1). 'All the people walk each in the name of its god' (Mic. 4: 5). This refers to the 'ways' which they are taught, or to the 'paths' in which they walk (cf. v. 2) i.e. the patterns of conduct prescribed by their religion. It is still men's '-isms' or idolatries which, though they may no longer possess the outward forms of religions, direct or restrain their conduct.

The created order, in spite of the ways in which men have perverted it, preserves a measure of justice and goodness among men.

Common Goodness as the surviving Image of God in Men

The Bible recognises conjugal love, common kindness, and parental care as an image of the divine love and goodness and fatherhood (cf. Eph. 3: 14f.). The husband-wife relationship is likened to that between Christ and his Church (Eph. 5: 21-23) and human fathers are somewhat in the likeness of the heavenly Father (Luke 11: 13). Sonship has the idea of likeness to the father (Matt. 5: 45; Gen. 5: 3; Gal. 3: 7).

Man was made in the image of God (Gen. 1: 26). That image is fading, defaced but not destroyed in the fall; but, in those who are in Christ (Gal. 3: 26), it is being renewed (Rom. 8: 29; Eph. 5: 23f.). He is 'the express image' (*charaktēr*, Heb. 1: 3) which is being 'impressed' on the Christians. The '*charaktēr*' is the raised surface of the stamp which reproduces the image on the coin or seal.

With or without the law of Moses, men do, to a considerable extent, what the law requires, and show evidence of a natural knowledge of what God requires (Rom. 2: 13-15). There is a general goodness of parents to children, and of husbands to wives, and a sense of common humanity which may move a Samaritan with compassion for a Jew.

The Rational Basis of Common Grace

Some would find a basis for such a universal morality in the human rationality. Men do have, in varying measure, a 'wisdom of the world', learned by observation and drawing on the knowledge of others (Ecc. 2: 14; 1: 16; 1 Kings 3: 12), but limited in perspective to this temporal life (Ecc. 1: 13). They recognise their mutual dependence and develop a morality of the 'common good' (Matt. 5: 46f.; 1 Tim. 5: 8). The 'common good' may be conceived widely or narrowly, idealistically or personalistically; it is by no means always as blatantly or consciously self-interested

as that of the unjust steward who is commended in Luke 16: 8 for his interpretation of 'sowing his bread on many waters' (Ecc. 11: 1f.)! Here and in the Golden Rule of Luke 6: 31 is a truly worldly and rational basis for goodness! It should, of course, be added, that one can follow Jesus's Golden Rule from other motives than self-interest; but it remains true that what Jesus was giving was a rule for outward conduct: the rule could be observed from a variety of motives, but the only reliable source of good deeds is a good heart. (Luke 6: 43-45).

Before we evaluate this common goodness, we must ask how the Bible evaluates goodness.

Goodness is judged by the aim and motive rather than by any intrinsic value in the action

It is possible to distinguish someone who is 'righteous' i.e. who acts correctly in accordance with some prescribed code of actions, from someone who is 'good' i.e. good to others. Paul makes this distinction in Rom. 5: 7, where *dikaios* represents the Hebrew *yashar* (upright), and *agathos* is nearer to *chrēstos* (kind). We say that God is good because He is good or kind to us men (Psa. 107; Eph. 2: 7). Goodness in this sense is directed to the interests of others, and determined by the object it serves rather than the actions in which it is expressed. Thus human goodness serves the glory of God in serving the best interests of one's neighbour (Matt. 5: 16).

This two-fold aim of human goodness preserves us, on the one hand, from a 'godliness' which disregards men's human needs, and, on the other hand, from a humanitarianism which ignores God's will for men. Good is what is acceptable to God (Rom. 12: 2) and done in love for our neighbour (13: 10), done in honour of the Lord (Jesus) and in praise to God (14: 6), for our neighbour's good (15: 1ff.). What we do for our brother in need is what we do for Jesus (Matt. 25: 34-45), and our works of love for our brother are the measure and expression of our love for God (1 John 3: 17-18; 4: 20-5: 3).

To serve Christ (Rom. 14: 18) means 'to pursue what makes for peace and mutual upbuilding' (v. 19), and this is acceptable to God (v. 18) rather than the doing of particular actions such as the observance of food regulation (14: 14-17): in itself, it is neither right nor wrong either to indulge or to abstain, to observe the day or to esteem all days alike (Rom. 14: 20f.; 5f.), but the observance or non-observance, may be the expression of our love or our disregard for our neighbour.

Goodness is manifested in good works (Matt. 7: 15-20; 12: 33-37), but it does not consist in them. Perfect righteousness and goodness consists in love for all men (Matt. 5: 20; 43-48), in self-renunciation and following Jesus, rather than in specific good deeds or even keeping the whole of God's commandments (Matt. 19: 16-21); in the humble service of God and others rather than the mere forsaking of things (19: 27-30).

God's judgment is according to the aim and motive of men's actions rather than the actions themselves. This is not to say that there is no intrinsic value in keeping the moral law and doing works of mercy; Jesus approves the keeping of the law, and commends the legal righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees (Matt. 5: 17-20); but their works of mercy were better done in secret (Matt. 6: 1-4).

Neither does it mean that men are judged merely according to their intentions, whether or not they put them into effect. 'Blessed are those who hear the word of God and keep it' (Luke 11: 28). Before the judgment-seat of Christ we shall receive the good or evil towards which our actions done in the body tend (2 Cor. 5: 10). Though a record of men's actions is kept against the day of judgment, the verdict is found in the book of life (Rev. 20: 12f.). Men are rewarded, not according to the debit or credit balance in the record of their works, but according to the direction and aim of their works (Rom. 2: 5-8): those who seek life by patience in well-doing will be saved from the wrath which all men deserve by their evil works (Rom. 3: 9-18).

Neither legal righteousness nor common goodness satisfies God's requirements

There are a number of passages, where Job and the Psalmists plead their integrity, and also in Romans 2, which appear to speak of a righteousness acceptable to God apart from his grace. However, one chapter of Paul's letter (to Romans) may not be so interpreted as to contradict the next. Paul in Romans 2 is not allowing a possibility of salvation outside Christ: his point is that God's judgment for Jew and for Greek is all on the same impartial basis (Rom. 2: 9-11). If any are, perhaps, saved without knowledge of the revealed law (Rom. 2: 15f.) none are saved apart from the grace of God in Christ (3: 21-24). The promise of righteousness by faith was prior to the law (4: 13), and God passed over the sins of those who were justified before Christ because of their hope in his righteousness, revealed in Christ (3: 21-25).

From the divine standpoint of judgment, by the criterion of the final aim of men's actions, the Bible can only condemn all human righteousness. The Jewish righteousness of works specifies certain actions as good e.g. almsgiving, irrespective of their motive or effect. For example Corban results in the dishonouring of parents when the motive is self-righteousness rather than honouring God (Matt. 15: 3-5). It is still true that the righteousness of law, whether the code is that of Moses, or that of the community, or of the individual, tends to subordinate individual human needs to rigid rules or principles. The righteousness of a true child of God must exceed such legal righteousness (Matt. 5: 20-45). On the other hand, the natural sense of justice (Rom. 2: 14-15), which might today include the new morality's version of the 'law of love' tends to serve the self-interest of others rather than the will of God for men. Thus, the common goodness of the Gentiles equally falls short of the goal of the glory of God (3: 23).

Good works done to others do not amount to Righteousness before God

Men may 'do what the law requires' (Rom. 2: 14) and yet 'there is none who is righteous (*dikaïos*)' and 'none who does good' (*chrēstotēs* = kindness) (3: 9-19), for 'no human being will be justified in God's sight by the works of the law' (3: 20). Men may perform actions which, in respect of other people, are kind and unselfish, yet, in relation to God, all men are totally depraved (Psa. 53: 3f.; 58: 3; Isa. 48: 8).

Apart from Christ, men are totally self-centred in aim and direction. Their idealistic or humanistic motives are the idolisation of their own ideals and especially of their ideals of man; and to these ideals they subordinate the interests even of those to whom they are most kind. The person is subordinated to the ideal of 'the good of mankind' or even of 'the development of personality'. Their genuine righteousness and compassion serve their idolisation of man as the giver of benefits to his fellows, or as his own redeemer from past iniquities, and from their consequences. This last, is also the motive of the Jew, especially the Pharisee, who seeks to expiate the sins of his fathers. It should, in fairness, be added, that there have always been Jews who have been motivated by gratitude for God's grace rather than by self-righteousness.

The integrity which the Psalmist pleads is in relation to his fellow-men (cf. Job 31). Job's friend is right in asking 'How can man be righteous before God? (25: 4, cf. Psa. 143: 2; 130: 3). But it does not help Job (26: 2), who concedes that he may have erred within himself (19: 4), but who still wants to know how God can fail to recompense his righteous dealings with his fellow-men (30: 20). He needs to be shown the unrighteousness of his best works. We make it unnecessarily hard for a man to recognise this, if, like Job's friends, we refuse to acknowledge in any way whatever the goodness he already recognises or exhibits.

Conclusion

We need not fear to recognise such goodness in non-Christians, or to ally ourselves with them in good works. Non-Christian goodness may be perverted with self-interest, but there is much non-Christian self-interest in *our* best works: and this common goodness has its origin in the divine image which we share with all men. Let us not call other men's good works evil or demonic because we cannot find a place for their good works in our theology (cf. Matt. 12: 24-32), or simply because they are not of us (Mk. 9: 38). Let us not despise or disparage such goodness, but acknowledge it, as Paul does in Romans 2, before we turn (Romans 3) to affirm our (not only 'their') total depravity apart from the righteousness of God by faith. In Luther's terms, we must distinguish nature as created from nature turned in on itself; and not fall into the error of treating the created order and created humanity as evil, and hostile in itself to the new humanity in Christ.