

Chapter XVIII: The Common Operation of the Holy Spirit: Common Grace

The study of the work of redemption wrought by Christ is naturally followed by a discussion of the application of this redemption to the hearts and lives of sinners by the special operation of the Holy Spirit. Before taking this up a brief chapter will be devoted to the general operations of the Holy Spirit, as these are seen in common grace.

1. Nature of Common Grace

When we speak of common grace, we have in mind either (a) those general operations of the Holy Spirit whereby He, without renewing the heart, exercises such a moral influence on man that sin is restrained, order is maintained in social life, and civil righteousness is promoted; or (b) those general blessings which God imparts to all men without any distinction as He sees fit. In distinction from the Arminians we maintain that common grace does not enable the sinner to perform any spiritual good, nor to turn to God in faith and repentance. It can be resisted by man, and is always more or less resisted, and at best affects only the externals of social, civil, moral, and religious life. While Christ died for the purpose of saving only the elect, nevertheless the whole human race, including the impenitent and the reprobate, derive great benefits from His death. The blessings of common grace may be regarded as indirect results of the atoning work of Christ.

2. Means of Common Grace

Several means may be distinguished: (a) The most important of these is the light of God's general revelation. Without this all other means would be impossible and ineffective. It lightens every man, and serves to guide the conscience of the natural man. (b) Human governments also serve this purpose. According to our Confession they are instituted to curb evil tendencies, and to promote good order and decency. (c) Public opinion is another important means wherever it is in harmony with the law of God. It has a tremendous influence on the conduct of men who are very sensitive to the judgment of public opinion. (d) Finally, divine punishments and rewards also serve to

encourage moral goodness in the world. The punishments often check the sinful deeds of men, and the rewards spur them on to do what is good and right.

3. The Effects of Common Grace

The following effects may be ascribed to the operation of common grace: (a) The execution of the sentence of death on man is deferred. God did not at once fully execute the sentence of death on the sinner, and does not do so now, but gives him time for repentance, Rom. 2:4; 2 Pet. 3:9. (b) Sin is restrained in the lives of individuals and nations. The corruption that entered human life through sin is retarded and not yet permitted to complete its destructive work, Gen. 20:6; 31:7; Job 1:12; 2:6. (c) Man still has some sense of the true, the good, and the beautiful, appreciates this in a measure, and reveals a desire for truth, morality, and certain forms of religion, Rom. 2:14, 15; Acts 17:22. (d) The natural man is still able to perform natural good or civil righteousness, works that are outwardly in harmony with the law, though without spiritual value, 2 Kings 10:29, 30; 12:2; 14:3; Luke 6:33. (e) All men receive numerous undeserved blessings from God, Ps. 145:9, 15, 16; Matt. 5:44, 45; Luke 6:35, 36; Acts 14:16, 17; 1 Tim. 4:10.

To memorize. Passages proving:

a. A general striving of the Spirit with men:

Gen. 6:3. "And Jehovah said, My Spirit shall not strive with man for ever, for that he also is flesh."

Isa. 63:10. "But they rebelled, and grieved His Holy Spirit: therefore He was turned to be their enemy, and Himself fought against them."

Rom. 1:28, "And even as they refused to have God in their knowledge, God gave them up unto a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not fitting."

b. Restraint of sin:

Gen. 20:6. "And God said unto him (Abimelech) in the dream, Yea, I know that in the integrity of thy heart thou hast done this, and I also withheld thee from sinning against me."

Gen. 31:7. "And your father hath deceived me, and changed my wages ten times; but God suffered him not to hurt me."

Ps. 105:14. "He suffered no man to do them wrong; yea, He reproveth kings for their sakes."

c. Good works on the part of unregenerate:

2 Kings 10:30. "And Jehovah said unto Jehu, because thou hast done well in executing that which is right in mine eyes, and hast done unto the house of Ahab according to all that was in my heart, thy sons of the fourth generation shall sit upon the throne of Israel." Cf. vs. 31.

Luke 6:33. "And if ye do good to them that do good to you, what thank have ye? for even sinners do the same."

Rom. 2:14, 15. "For when Gentiles that have not the law do by nature the things of the law, these not having the law, are the law unto themselves; in that they show the work of the law written in their hearts."

d. Unmerited blessings on all men:

Ps. 145:9. "Jehovah is good to all; and His tender mercies are over all His works."

Matt. 5:44, 45. "But I say unto you, Love your enemies, and pray for them that persecute you; that ye may be sons of your Father who is in heaven: for He makes His sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust."

1 Tim. 4:10. "For to this end we labor and strive, because we have our hope set on the living God, who is the Savior of all men, especially of them that believe."

For Further Study:

- a. Which are the three points emphasized by our Church as to common grace?
- b. How do Matt. 21:26, 46; Mark 14:2 show the restraining influence of public opinion?
- c. How do Rom. 1:24, 26, 28, and Heb. 6:4-6 prove common grace?

Questions for Review:

1. What is common grace?
2. What is our view in distinction from the Arminian?
3. Does common grace have any spiritual and saving effect?
4. Is it in any way connected with the redemptive work of Christ?
5. By what means does common grace work?
6. What are the effects of common grace?