



*We live in a fallen world. But God's common grace means the world is not as loveless, ugly and chaotic as it could be. The Bible teaches that God restrains evil so that God's creation may be preserved, ordered lives can continue and ultimately that God may be glorified and the Gospel preached to all nations.*



Common grace ensures that God's image in us is not completely eradicated by the fall. We are not as evil as we could be. Of course, common grace has never saved anyone. Common grace restrains the heart but does not give a new heart – only saving grace can do that.

And we are also abundantly blessed, whether we acknowledge God or not. Jesus said the Father “causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous” (Matthew 5:45). God is “kind to the ungrateful and wicked” (Luke 6:35). The beauty, joy and order we all experience is thanks to common grace.

There are two main aspects to common grace. On the one hand, God blesses and sustains his creation and gives talents and abilities to people. On the other, God restrains sin in a variety of ways, including the governing authorities and individual consciences.

This briefing looks at this important and often neglected doctrine.

# God's blessings for all

*“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”*

**JAMES 1:17**

Scripture highlights the abundance of good things God has provided in his creation.

God cares for, waters and enriches the earth, and provides grain (Psalm 65:9). The Lord provides the springs that give drink to every beast of the field, gives the grass for the cattle, and plants for man to cultivate (Psalm 104:10-11, 14). Creatures small and great look to God to give them food at the proper time (Psalm 104:27; Psalm 136:25). God is good to all and has compassion on all he has made (Psalm 145:9).

The Apostle Paul told those in Lystra that God “has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy” (Acts 14:17). God gives countless blessings to all men, so many that we can feel joy.

In 2 Corinthians 9:10 Paul says that God “supplies seed to the sower and bread for food”. God provides not only the crops, but also the bakeries. The bakers who make the bread are part of God's common grace.

And not only bakers. Scientists, artists, authors, architects, tradesmen, athletes, skilled political leaders – and many others – all use talents that God has given them. Common grace is seen where there are unbelievers who are good parents, inspirational school teachers, thoughtful neighbours or compassionate carers.



# Definitions of common grace



*...God's goodness, which thus contends with the wickedness of men, shines forth universally even towards the ungodly, so that He does not cease to cherish and preserve those whom He has created, although they be unworthy. He therefore does good to the ungodly, because He is their Creator<sup>1</sup>*

John Calvin – 16th century Reformer and theologian

*Common grace is the grace of God by which he gives people innumerable blessings that are not part of salvation.<sup>2</sup>*

Wayne Grudem –  
Phoenix Seminary, from 2001



*...every favour of whatever kind or degree, falling short of salvation, which this undeserving and sin-cursed world enjoys at the hand of God<sup>3</sup>*

John Murray – Westminster Theological Seminary, 1930-66

*...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 through His general or special revelation, that sin is restrained, order is maintained in social life, and civil righteousness is promoted; or, (b) those general blessings, such as rain and sunshine, food and drink, clothing and shelter, which God imparts to all men indiscriminately where and in what measure it seems good to Him.<sup>5</sup>*

Louis Berkhof – Calvin Theological Seminary, 1906-1944

*...the Holy Spirit as the Spirit of truth, of holiness, and of life in all its forms, is present with every human mind, enforcing truth, restraining from evil, exciting to good, and imparting wisdom or strength, when, where, and in what measure seemeth to Him good<sup>4</sup>*

Charles Hodge –  
Princeton Theological  
Seminary, 1822-78





# Restraining sin; promoting good

**T**he whole of creation was powerfully affected by the fall. Evil has entered the universe – that is why we have disease and natural disasters. The world is not as it ought to be. As Paul says in Romans 8, it is subject to frustration and in bondage to decay. But the disruptive effect of sin on creation is restrained. A level of order is maintained in creation. God promises Noah: “As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease” (Genesis 8:22). The full effect of sin on mankind is also held back. Sin is so serious that man would completely destroy his fellow man if God withdrew his restraining hand. We would wipe each other out. So God must restrain wickedness in many ways.

## SALT AND LIGHT

God restrains evil through Christian believers being salt and light. The world is a decaying and dark place, but Jesus’ followers are like salt preventing decay and like light shining in the darkness (Matthew 5:13-16). Godly Christians influence the world around them for good.



## MARRIAGE

The institution of marriage and the family is another way in which God restrains sin. The marriage bond creates a real, one-flesh union between a man and a woman which is intrinsically fulfilling. Marriage also restrains the wrong impulses of adults. And it is in the family that parents teach their children right from wrong. The family is the main way in which values are passed down from one generation to another.



## THE STATE

God restrains evil through governments enforcing laws and punishing offenders. In Romans 13 and 1 Peter 2, for example, the Bible is quite clear that the governing authorities act on God’s behalf to restrain evil.



## CONSCIENCE

Romans 1 is a grim record of what happens when people act against their conscience and their hearts become hardened. We can see some like that in our society today, but we can also see other people who do what is right, even though they do not know Christ. Paul argues that the conscience restrains sin.

In Romans 2:14-15 Paul says that Gentiles “show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts, their consciences also bearing witness, and their thoughts now accusing, now even defending them”.

Man is fallen, but still has a moral sense. People feel guilty when they do what is wrong. Their conscience accuses

them. People feel good when they do what is right. Their conscience defends them.

Non-Christians can often agree with Christian standards because of their conscience. In a democracy Christians can seek to argue for what is right and use common sense arguments to back up their case, and they can find that non-Christians agree with them. When we speak up for what is right, then we have an ally in the conscience of those who hear us.



## CONSEQUENCES

God restrains sin through the fact that actions have consequences. Paul says in Galatians 6:7 – “Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.”

In the Bible we have the maker’s instructions. When we obey God’s laws they work in practice. They are good for people. They go with the grain of human nature, because that is how we are made. A non-Christian man who does not cheat at work and who is faithful to his wife will experience a measure of blessing in this life. None of these things will save him or earn him any merit with God, but he will experience blessing because a man reaps what he sows.

## PUBLIC OPINION

Public opinion can be the collective expression of many people’s consciences and can act as a restraint on sin. As with individual consciences, public opinion can become hardened on some issues. One example of this in the UK is the acceptance of abortion. But when this happens, public opinion can still remain a restraint in other areas.



# Implications of common grace

Jesus Christ himself sustains the universe (Hebrews 1:3, Colossians 1:17). One day Christ will return and inaugurate a new heaven and a new earth. Then we will see the true splendour of God's creation. Until that day God will restrain the effect of sin on creation and on man.

We must thank God that evil is restrained and that we are prevented from being as wicked as we could be. We must also give thanks that Christian and non-Christian alike can experience beauty, love and joy even in this fallen world.

It is particularly important that Christians realise the seriousness of men and women rejecting God's common grace, resisting and working against the means which God has provided to restrain sin and bless all people. We only have to look around us

today to realise what has happened.

The more consciences become hardened, the more society turns its back on marriage and the more we deny that actions have consequences, the more sadness and heartache there will be in our society. Sin is like a blackmailer. It always comes back for more. A society like our own which celebrates sin is in very great danger. We cannot break God's law without there being consequences – to a degree in this life, and fully in the life to come.

The issues may change from time to time, but the biblical principles remain the same. We are to be salt and light. And we must remember that although we cannot make people accept biblical standards, in a democracy we can at least argue for them. And we must argue for them if we love our neighbour.

*References are available at:*  
***[the.ci/cg-ref](http://the.ci/cg-ref)***

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