**Foundations (38 of 60) Common Grace - RC Sproul**

Many people understand grace as a gift we don't deserve, but Scripture uses grace in a more nuanced way. Common grace is our subject on Renewing Your Mind. Amazing grace, how sweet the sound, that saved a wretch like me.

This familiar hymn celebrates saving grace or special grace, the kind that's given to believers when they're saved. But there's another form of grace found in the Bible, a grace that's given to everyone. Hello, I'm Lee Webb, and on this weekend edition of Renewing Your Mind, Dr. R.C. Sproul discusses the meaning of this common grace.

This lesson is just one of sixty in the comprehensive series called Foundations, an Overview of Systematic Theology. Here's the founder and chairman of Ligonier Ministries, Dr. R.C. Sproul. We come now to a whole new section in the study of systematic theology, and it's that subdivision of theology that we call soteriology.

Now, this word may seem foreign to many people. It's not your everyday common word that is used in the church, but it's a very important word because it comprises those matters that pertain to our salvation. The word soteriology comes from the Greek.

The word sozo or sozomai is the verb in the New Testament Greek that means to save. And the noun of the word Savior is the word soter, and so we have soteriology coming from that. Just a word in passing, that in the Scriptures when the Bible speaks of salvation, it speaks of salvation in more than one way.

We're accustomed to using the term salvation or being saved in the ultimate sense of being redeemed by God and brought into a saving relationship to Him that will last for eternity. But in the Scriptures, for God to save somebody can mean several different things. The word to save refers to any act of rescue from a serious and dire circumstance or from a calamitous situation.

If you are restored from a life-threatening disease, you're saved. If you are rescued from capture in battle, you are saved. Any rescue from calamity is a kind of salvation biblically.

And that will be important as we will see in a minute why that is. But then there is the ultimate sense of salvation where, in that regard, the great calamity from which we are saved is from God. That is, we are saved from having to face God in His wrath on the day of judgment, and we are rescued from that wrath which is to come.

So that God is at the same time the Savior and the One from whom we are saved. But now, in the subject of soteriology, where we restudy the matters of salvation, at the center of our concern, particularly in Reformed theology, is the concept of grace. I can remember when I was a graduate student in the Netherlands, my professor, Dr. Berkhower, once made the observation that the very essence of theology is grace, and the essence of ethics is gratitude.

And he saw the link between those two, that from the beginning to the end, salvation is of the Lord, and it is not something that we earn or that we deserve, but it is given freely from the mercy and from the love of God. But when we speak of grace, the first thing that we have in view is the distinction between grace and justice. Justice is something that is earned or merited or is due to a person by some standard.

Usually, when we think of justice, we think of the standard of works. And when Paul writes about our salvation, he makes it very clear that if we were saved by our works, then our salvation would not be of grace. But since it is of grace, and that indicates that it is not of works.

But justice has to do with correspondence to some kind of standard of merit or of earning. I say that by way of contrast that grace is something that is not deserved, that is not merited, that is not earned, and is something that is given freely by God, something that He is never obligated or required to do. We remember His statement to Moses that are quoted by Paul in Romans, wherein God said, I will have mercy upon whom I will have mercy.

That grace is always a divine prerogative, never a requirement. And it's critical that we understand that because it gets in our heads quite frequently to think that God owes us something. And that if He were really good, He would give us a better life or so on.

And the minute we think that God owes us something, remember that if you think it's owed, you're not thinking anymore about grace. You're thinking about justice, because grace is never owed. And even if God is pleased to be gracious to this person and withhold that same grace from this person, it's still a matter of grace to this person.

And because He's gracious to this one does not mean He's therefore obligated to give the same grace to somebody else. Because we're not talking about obligation here. We're not talking about justice.

We're talking about sovereign mercy and grace. And so the classic definition of grace is unmerited or unearned favor. It is when God behaves in a favorable manner to us in a way where we have no claim to it by virtue of our merit that we are speaking of grace.

Now, in theology and in our study of the doctrines of grace, the first distinction that we have to make in this section, and remember it is the theologian's prerogative always to make distinctions. The first distinction here regarding grace is a distinction that's important, and that is a distinction between what we call common grace and what we call special grace. Common grace and special grace.

Common grace is called common because it is virtually universal. It refers to that grace that God gives to all people indiscriminately. The mercy and kindness that extends to the human race as distinguished from the special grace of redemption that God gives to the saved.

So the common grace is the grace of God that we all experience in a broad sense. For example, the Bible, when it speaks of the providence of God, says that the rain falls on the just and on the unjust. Now, think about that for a moment.

How important is it for us to have rain in certain sequences and periodices in order for us to survive as people? The crops that we grow are dependent upon rain. I'll never forget when we had the problem in Florida of the droughts that created the wildfires that were life-threatening, where a whole county was evacuated. Every single person in that county had to be evacuated.

And I remember living nearby those fires, and people had been praying for rain, and I happened to be at a golf course one day in the lunchroom when all of a sudden this mass of people started yelling and shouting and cheering as they came in off the golf course soaking wet because there was this cloudburst, and that's something I had never seen in my life. At a golf course, golfers cheering when it started to rain. Usually they're all grumbling and mumbling if they're forced off the golf course because of a storm.

But on this occasion, the drought had been so severe that everybody was cheering. Well, rain is something that we tend to take for granted, but the Bible says God sends His rain to the just and to the unjust. You may have two farmers in the same town.

One may be devout and committed to the things of God. The other person may be utterly profane, as pagan as he can possibly be. Both of them need the rain for their crops.

And God, in His goodness, waters the earth, and so both profit from the shower, not because they've earned it. Neither one of them really deserves the rain to nurture their crops. But God's showers and rains falls upon the just as well as on the unjust.

There's the old cliche that it rains on the just fellow and the unjust fellow. The problem is that the unjust fellow usually has the just fellow's umbrella. But in any case, common grace refers to the kindness and benefits and the favors that God pours out liberally to people, whether they are believers or not believers.

But we're not just talking here about rain. We're talking about a multitude of favors that are enjoyed by people who are not in fellowship with God through personal redemption. And we see that these things that God gives of life and health and safety and order and all the rest that we need to survive is something that God does in order to preserve His creation.

From the fall of man, God did not utterly destroy the whole human race, but He has preserved the human race even to this day. And we have seen a progress in history of the impact of God's grace on just simply the standard of living of people. I know that not everyone in this world enjoys an equal standard of living.

Not everyone in America has the same standard of living, and certainly the basic standard of living in America is much greater than in other parts of the world where people live in abject poverty and severe deprivation. Nevertheless, even in those areas, the life expectancy and the quality of life tends to be significantly better than it was for the masses of the populated areas of the world in centuries past. So that just life itself has become easier and better, as it were, as the progress of history.

And not the least of the reasons that has provoked the improvement of life and the conditions of life, which many people will attribute simply to science or to the secular enterprise of education, we have to look to the influence of the Christian church on the world over the past 2,000 years. You realize that the orphanage movement in history was stimulated and made in Maine by the Christian community, that the hospital movement, the educational movement of early centuries, was sparked and stimulated by the church, and even the development of science in many ways was stimulated by the Christians who were convinced that they had a responsibility to dress and till and keep the earth, and to be good stewards of this planet that God has given to us. And so if we would chart the history of the influence of the Christian church on law, on ethics, on mercy, on education, and all these different spheres, we would see that quite to the contrary of those who decry the impact of religion on the world, that really the general quality of life on this planet has been vastly improved by the influence of Christianity.

Now, why is that? Well, one of the reasons that is is that the church is always called and the Christian is called to imitate Christ, as Christ imitates God. And as Christians engaged in the Christian life, we are called to be imitators of God. That's what it means to be made in the image of God.

And if God is concerned about common grace, the general welfare of the human race, what is our responsibility? We are also called to be concerned about the general welfare of the human race. In fact, Jesus says if your neighbor, or even in this case if it's your enemy, is naked, you clothe him. If he's hungry, you feed him.

And if he's thirsty, you give him the drink. If he's in prison, you go and visit him. If he's sick, you minister to him.

And we see Jesus demonstrating in His ministry, for example, the parable of the Good Samaritan, indicates the priority that Jesus gives to His church to be concerned not only in the special grace realm of evangelism, but also to be concerned about the general welfare of the human race. What does James tell us? But the essence of true religion is the care of orphans and widows. Now, I labor this point for a reason, that there has been a strange divorce that has taken place in the last hundred or so years in the Christian community.

A crisis occurred in the nineteenth century with the advent of nineteenth-century liberal theology which, by and large, rejected the supernatural aspects of the Christian faith, denied the virgin birth, denied the resurrection, denied the atonement, the deity of Christ, and so on. And they had a crisis because they had basically rejected historic Christianity, and yet they had tons of money invested in careers and in church buildings and programs and institutions all over the place. And so in order for them to remain viable from a social perspective, they had to create a new agenda for the church.

Well, they said, we already have an agenda, and it's the humanitarian outreach concerns, the ministries of mercy, and they began to put their emphasis on taking care of the social agenda at the expense of evangelism. And orthodox Christians were saying, wait a minute, the church is still about the supernatural questions of personal reconciliation, and we've got to almost double our efforts for evangelism to make up for the repudiation of it that is coming from the liberal wing. And this unnatural schism took place where evangelicals began to say, oh, social action, social concern, concern for the general welfare of the human race, that's a liberal matter, that's a liberal agenda, whereas concern for souls and personal salvation, that's the real concern of the church.

If Christ would hear that, He would say a pox on both of your houses because the church is called not only to the ministry of special grace, but also to the ministry of common grace. And that means as Christians we have to be concerned about poverty, we have to be concerned about hunger, we have to be concerned about people's having the basic necessities of life in terms of housing, in terms of clothing, and reaching out to their misery. I can remember when the AIDS epidemic first started out, and I heard people who claimed to be Christians saying that they weren't going to do anything to support the victims of AIDS.

And I said, why would you say that? And they said, well, because AIDS is contracted out of a wicked, sinful lifestyle, either through drugs or homosexual activity and so on, and we can't be supportive of that. And I said, wait a minute. If you find somebody sick and dying in a ditch, you don't ask them how they got in that ditch.

The love of Christ is to constrain you to pull them out of that ditch and do everything you can to preserve them. That's what the story of the Good Samaritan is all about. It's not that anybody is qualified to receive the ministry or the mercy of God.

I'm not qualified. If somebody who's contracted AIDS is not qualified to be helped by the mercy of the church, then neither am I, and neither are you, because all of us receive the benefits of this mercy on the basis of grace. And particularly those of us who have received what we might call uncommon grace or special grace should be the last people in the world to eschew the granting of mercy commonly to people.

Now, another point I want to make about this. Conflict in the Christian church. When can a Christian join hands or stand shoulder to shoulder with pagans or with contrary religions or even apostate religions? Francis Schaeffer once said, When it comes to common grace matters, the Christian must be a co-belligerent with all kinds of people who are not Christians.

You have a march for the rights of the unborn. Before you protest abortion on demand, do you check out the membership card of the person who's standing with you? This is a common grace issue. And I will stand next to new age people.

I will stand next to demon worshipers if I have to, if they have a concern about the general welfare of the unborn, and I will stand shoulder to shoulder with those people in such a public protest, because that's an arena of common grace, where we commonly are to reach out and be supportive of people. Now, if it's a worship service, am I going to stand shoulder to shoulder in a worship service with members of a satanic cult? Am I going to stand shoulder to shoulder in a worship service or in a prayer breakfast with Muslims? No, I can't do that, because that's the realm of special grace. And so we need to understand the difference between these two.

One last point as our time is running out, and that has to do with the love of God. We hear in Romans 9 that Paul makes the observation, which we'll explore more in our next session, Jacob have I loved, Esau have I hated. Now, whatever that text means, as problematic as it is, obviously there is one sense in which Jacob is loved in a way that Esau isn't.

So what does that do with our popular concept that God loves everybody, and He loves everybody unconditionally? Well, He doesn't love everybody unconditionally. But here again we make a distinction between God's love of benevolence and His love of complacency. Now, that word is derived from an older form of the word.

When we say that somebody is complacent today, we mean that they're smug, you know, that they're really kind of above it all and somewhat arrogant. That's not what is meant here. The love of benevolence has to do with the general kindness that God has and His concern for the general well-being of human beings.

In that sense, it can be said that God loves everybody in the sense in which we've been talking, that He makes His sun to shine on everybody. He gives the gift of air and breath and life and nutrients to everybody indiscriminately. The love of complacency has to do with His redemptive love, the love that is focused chiefly on His beloved Son Christ and which spills out to those who are in Christ.

That God has a special love for the redeemed that He doesn't have for the rest of the world. And that's another part of the distinction between the common grace of God and the special grace of God because there is an astonishment in the Scripture about the special love of God that we experience in salvation. Special grace and common grace, an important distinction in our journey through systematic theology here on Renewing Your Mind with Dr. R.C. Sproul.

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