

God's Grace

The simplest (and perhaps best) biblical definition of grace is “God’s unmerited favor shown to those who deserve wrath.”

Common Grace vs. Covenantal Grace

As we will see, although God directs His goodness and love especially to His covenant people (the elect)¹, there are also senses in which God’s goodness and love are universal.

- Psa. 145:9 – “Good is YHWH to all and has compassion on all He has made.”
- Matt. 5:45 – God displays His love even for His enemies by sending them rain and sunshine.
- Acts 14:16-17 – “In past generations [the true and living God] allowed all the nations to walk in their own ways. Yet He did not leaven Himself without witness, for He did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.”

¹ I use “covenantal” to refer to those who are in covenant relationship with God through faith in Christ. This is a stark contrast to Reformed Christians who “broadly” use this word to refer to anyone in the covenant community, which includes unbelievers who have been sprinkled with water and are somehow declared members of the covenant because of their parents’ faith. Of course this is a broad generalization, but overall this is a good summary of their understanding of who belongs to the covenant community. Of course, this has biblical precedent in the old covenant, as unbelieving males (who would one day be head of a new family) were brought into the covenant community (Israel) through the outward act of circumcision. However, in light of progressive revelation, we have a new and better covenant which makes the old ones obsolete (cf. Heb. 8:13). The new covenant is built on better promises (Heb. 8:6), but is only for those who belong to it. So who belongs to it? As the author of Hebrews notes, quoting Jeremiah 31, it is **only** for those who have been regenerated (in the language of Jesus, “born again”) and given a new heart (Heb. 8:7-13, esp. v.10b). One is brought into the covenant community not through the circumcision of physical flesh, but circumcision of the heart (“flesh” used by Paul as an expression of the “old Adam”), as seen in Romans 2:28-29 (cf. Deut. 10:16; 30:6; Jer. 4:4. This is precisely what Paul is getting at when, talking to Christians, he says in Col. 2:11-12, “You were also circumcised in [Christ] with a circumcision not done with hands, by putting off the body of flesh, **in the circumcision of Christ, when you were buried with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised with Him through faith** in the working of God, who raised Him from the dead.” In the new covenant, covenant members are not a mixed bag of believers and unbelievers, but are simply those with new hearts who have believed the gospel, revealing they are indeed God’s elect people (which is expressed in believer’s immersion [more commonly known as “baptism”: the Greek word literally means immersion]). In a very real sense, this is why I am not so much a “Reformed” Baptist as I am a “Calvinist” Baptist!!

John Murray defines common grace as “every favor of whatever kind or degree, falling short of salvation, which this undeserving and sin-cursed world enjoys at the hand of God.”²

John Frame gives a helpful list of ways God displays His common (non-saving) grace to His world:

1. He restrains sin

- E.g. Gen. 4:15; 11:6; 20:6; 2 Kn. 19:27-28; 2 Thes. 2:7

2. He restrains His wrath

- E.g. Acts 14:16; 17:17:30; Rom. 2:4-5

3. He gives temporal blessings to all

- E.g. Psa. 65:5-13; 104:10-23, 27-28; 145:9, 15-16; Acts 14:17

4. Unregenerate people do good

- Though no one is perfectly and objectively good, or does good perfectly, the Bible nevertheless attributes mankind with an ability to do good in a comparative and subjective sense.
 - Luke 6:33 – “And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you?”
 - As Jesus says elsewhere, even imperfect, “evil” parents have the ability and desire to give “good” gifts to their children (Matt. 7:11).
 - E.g. of Jehu in 2 Kings 10:29-31.

5. Unregenerate people can know truth

- God’s grace is abundant in allowing humanity (including those who deny His very existence) to explore and benefit from His glorious creation and the unchanging laws He has incorporated into it.

² Cited from John Frame, *Systematic Theology*, 247.

6. Unregenerate people can experience the blessing of being around God's people

- The [current] blessings of so many who live in the USA, who have inherited the moral norms of the Puritans who imported them many centuries ago.
- Cf. Heb. 6:4-6

Thus, the Bible affirms and clearly teaches that God's unmerited kindness and love is showered daily upon those who blatantly blaspheme Him and reject His lordship over their lives. Though such people deserve God's judgment and wrath, they nevertheless experience undeserved temporal blessings during their lifetime.

However, when the Bible talks about "grace", it *always* refers to God's special favor that He shows to, and showers upon, His elect.

- As John Frame points out, the Scripture never uses the Hebrew word for grace (חֵן, *khēn*), or the Greek word (χάρις, *charis*), to refer to God's blessings on creation generally or on non-elect humanity.³

That is, there is a distinguishing kind of grace that God bestows upon His elect: **covenantal** grace (perhaps better known as "saving" or "sovereign" grace).

The attribute of being gracious is inherent in the triune God's very nature: God *is* gracious.

- And yet, as we've seen with all of His other attributes, we must make sure that we hold all of God's attributes in harmony.

When thinking about God's gracious, we must remember the attribute of God's perfect freedom, for if we don't, the logical outcome of our definition of His grace will require us to be universalists, something the Bible clearly teaches against. Moreover, if grace is demanded or required, grace is no longer grace (i.e. a free, undeserved gift).

³ Frame, *ST*, 246.

- The Bible teaches us that God is absolutely free and sovereign in the bestowal of His grace.⁴
 - Rom. 9:6-24

This grace – this free gift of salvation – is also **eternal**.

- 2 Tim. 1:9 – “[God] saved us and called us to a holy calling, not because of our works but because of His own purpose and grace, which He gave us in Christ Jesus *before the ages began.*” (cf. Eph. 1:4-6, 11-12)

Moreover, this grace is **active**.

- Grace *enables* God’s elect to repent and believe, and thus be saved.
 - Eph. 2:8-9; Phil. 1:29; Acts 5:31; 11:18
 - ➔ This helps us understand the relation between God’s grace and our faith in salvation in Rom. 4:16.
- God’s grace also gifts and enables believers to serve one another.
 - E.g. 1 Cor. 12:4-7
 - ➔ The word for “gifts” (ESV) is *charismata*, that is, these spiritual gifts are sovereignly and graciously dispensed to the elect as the sovereign triune God sees fit (Not only is God free to choose *who* receives His grace, He is also free in deciding *how much* grace He bestows to His people).

Finally, this grace is **mediated** through, and **seen** most clearly in, the Lord **Jesus** Christ.

⁴ Ironically, most people champion man’s “free will” that [somehow] nullifies God’s free will even though the Scriptures do the very opposite!! Man does have a free will, however, in that he has the freedom to choose according to his fallen, corrupt, depraved, sinful nature (heart). This is why God must give sinners a new heart if they are ever going to “freely” choose to believe the gospel of Christ. Just as man is able to freely choose according to his nature, so too is God. Because God’s nature is gracious, His freedom to choose is based entirely upon grace: that is, He never chooses anyone based on anything other than His free, unconditional, electing grace.

- Frame is indeed right when he concludes his section on God’s attribute of grace, saying, “So all the blessings of God come to us by God’s sovereign grace.”
 - But I would slightly add to that statement and say, “all the blessings of God come to us in Christ and *by* His sovereign grace.”
- Lawson: the ocean of God’s infinite grace is channeled to us through the conduit of the Christ.
 - John 1:14, 17 – “And the Word flesh became and tabernacled among us, and we have seen God’s glory in Him, glory as the One and Only [eternally] begotten Son from the Father, full of grace and truth...For the law through Moses was given; *the* grace and *the* truth through Jesus Christ came.”⁵

This grace, mediated through Christ, comes to us *through the gospel* of Jesus Christ, which Paul calls “the word of [God’s] grace” (Acts 14:3; cf. 20:32).

The gospel displays to us God’s glorious grace in the face of Christ (cf. 2 Cor. 4:4-6; cf. Acts 20:24; 1 Tim. 1:11).

The purpose God freely bestows His sovereign grace upon His elect: that we might praise Him for His glorious grace (Eph. 1:6). Not only in graciously giving us Christ, but also graciously giving us the new hearts, faith, repentance, and love for Christ which procure our salvation in Christ.

Perhaps there’s no better way to close than by quoting one of C.H. Spurgeon’s favorite hymns:

*Grace, ‘tis a charming sound / melodious in mine ear
Heav’n with the echo shall resound / and all the earth shall hear.*

⁵ These are my own translations from the Greek text. I believe the definite articles are under Wallace’s category of “par excellence.” That is, the culmination of grace and truth – though seen dimly in the old covenant – are realized most fully in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Most translations leave the article (“the”) out, perhaps because the nouns are “qualitative.” See Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 222-23, 244-45.

*Grace first contrived a way / to save rebellious man;
And all the steps that grace display / which drew the wondrous plan.*

*Grace first inscribed my name / in God's eternal book;
'Twas grace that gave me to the Lamb / Who all my sorrows took.*

*Grace taught my wondering feet / to tread the heav'nly road,
And new supplies each hour I meet / while pressing on to God.*

*Grace taught my soul to pray / and made mine eyes o'erflow;
'Twas grace which kept me to this day / and will not let me go.*

*Grace all the works shall crown / through everlasting days;
It lays in heav'n the topmost stone / and well deserves the praise.*

*O let Thy grace inspire / my soul with strength divine;
May all my pow'rs to Thee aspire / and all my days be Thine.⁶*

Closing prayer: "Need of Grace" in *Valley of Vision* (pp.180-81)

⁶ "Grace, 'Tis a Charming Sound." Verses 1,2,4,6 written by Phillip Doddridge, 1740; verses 3 & 5 written by Augustus Toplady in 1776.