

Introduction: Consider the world around us. Everywhere we see a mixture of good and evil. We understand the good from the revealed moral character of God. That which deviates from God’s moral goodness is evil. Evil can be a minor deviation from God’s goodness, or a major deviation.

The mixture of good and evil can be seen among both religious and non-religious people. As Christians, we may be inclined to say, “Christians are different.” And so they are. But we would be wrong to believe there is no evil among them. Think of the widely publicized examples of Christian leaders who have done abominable things and got caught. Think of the grievous sins of David and Samson. Remember the deception of Abraham to protect his wife, Sarah. Consider that even the most morally good Christian, closely following Christ, is but a “sinner saved by grace.” Some Christians committed gross sins before the saving grace of God came to them. There is no grouping of people who live life completely free from evil. How are we to understand this truth? We thank God that our salvation is not based on our own life. It is Christ’s life and His record that is the basis for our salvation.

None Are Righteous: In Romans 3:10-12, Paul says, *“as it is written: ‘None is righteous, no, not one; ¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God. ¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.’”* This is a serious problem. Without holiness, no one will see God.

The shadow of Adam and Eve’s sin hovers over all people to this day. No one is righteous until God intervenes. This lack of righteousness of all people in their natural state is often called “total depravity.” It is a consequence of the Fall. To become righteous, one must become like God in moral character. The only way anyone can become righteous is through God’s intervention. Every person needs God’s “saving grace.” The enduring consequences of the fall mean that every natural born person is born spiritually dead.

To partake of the spiritual blessings of God, all need spiritual regeneration, giving them new spiritual life. God initiates and completes regeneration, gives saving faith leading to belief in Christ and His Father. The new spiritual life and belief in God does not of itself deal with the penalty due the new believer’s sins, nor does it eliminate their sin nature. After regeneration and the gift of saving faith, God first

deals with the penalty due sins by pardoning (justifying) the new believer freeing them from the penalty due their sins. He does this based on the atoning salvation work of Christ in which He took upon Himself our sins and paid the penalty due with His death on the cross.

A believer, though regenerated and justified (pardoned) continues to have a sin nature. To deal with the sin nature, God sends the Holy Spirit to indwell the believer, beginning the transformation of the new believer into a moral likeness of Christ. That process continues until mortal death or Christ comes again. The Holy Spirit finalizes that transformation when the believer stands before God.

What Total Depravity Means: Total depravity does not mean people are as bad as they possibly could be. It means every aspect of every person's being has been affected by the consequences of the Fall. The moral depravity and spiritual darkness produced by the Fall touch everyone's intellect, affections, will, heart, soul, spirit, and body. Every relationship is affected – relationship with God, to other people, and even between their own body and soul.

As they live in the world, all people experience constant immersion in a mixture of good and evil. Christians don't usually think of other Christians as being involved in evil, but believers do continue to sin. The Apostle John says of believers, if you say you don't sin, you lie. Believers continue to wrestle with sin.

What about non-believers? Are there non-believers who are morally good? The answer clearly is yes. Having not received regeneration and God's saving faith, they are not "righteous before God." Yet, many non-believers have "good character," exhibiting good moral traits like honesty and generosity. They can be loving and pleasant to be with. In other words, they show no outward signs of total depravity and perhaps so more signs of sin than shown by believers. What goes on? There is an obvious tension between the doctrine of total depravity and what we see in people around us. That tension led John Murray and others to ask questions.

John Murray's Questions: *"... if we appreciate the implications of total depravity, then we are faced with a series of very insistent questions. How is it that men who still lie under the wrath and curse of God and are heirs of hell enjoy so many good gifts at the hand of God? How is it that men who are not savingly renewed by the Spirit of God nevertheless exhibit so many qualities, gifts and accomplishments*

that promote the preservation, temporal happiness, cultural progress, social and economic improvement of themselves and of others? How is it that races and peoples that have been apparently untouched by the redemptive and regenerative influences of the gospel contribute so much to what we call human civilization? To put the question most comprehensively: how is it that this sin-cursed world enjoys so much favour and kindness at the hand of its holy and ever-blessed Creator?

Elementary acquaintance with the history and literature of this world will convince us that even the heathen have their noble examples of what, to human norms of judgment at least, may be called courage, heroism, honesty, justice, fidelity, and even mercy.”(Collected Writings of John Murray, Vol.2, “Common Grace,” 93.)

Louis Berkhof’s Comments: *“There is in the world, alongside of the course of the Christian life with all its blessings, a natural course of life, which is not redemptive and yet exhibits many traces of the true, the good, and the beautiful. The question arose, How can we explain the comparatively orderly life in this world, seeing that the whole world lies under the curse of sin? How is it that the earth yields precious fruit in abundance and does not simply bring forth thorns and thistles? How can we account for it that sinful man still retains some knowledge of God, of natural things, and of the difference between good and evil, and shows some regard for virtue and good behavior? What explanation can be given of the special gifts and talents with which natural man is endowed, and of the development of science and art by those who are entirely devoid of the new life that is in Christ Jesus? How can we explain the religious aspirations of men everywhere, even of those who did not come in touch with the Christian religion? How can the unregenerate still speak the truth, do good to others, and lead outwardly virtuous lives?” (Systematic Theology, 1941, 432).*

The Role of Common Grace in a Sinful World: Both Murray and Berkhof’s answer to the questions they raise about the good among people untouched by God’s saving grace is “God’s common or non-saving grace.” It is true that humanity is depraved and deserves God’s wrath. Yet, God mercifully postpones His destroying wrath. He graciously blesses the whole human race with benefits given freely and universally without distinction between one person and another. It is grace because it is undeserved and sovereignly given by God (despite the fact many humans are hostile to God). One aspect of common grace is God’s delaying His destroying wrath.

Here is what Peter says about that coming day of God's wrath. 2 Peter 3:11, *"But the day of the Lord will come like a thief, and then the heavens will pass away with a roar, and the heavenly bodies will be burned up and dissolved, and the earth and the works that are done on it will be exposed."* God's judgment is suspended until such time as God will create a *"according to his promise ... new heavens and a new earth in which righteousness dwells."* (2 Peter 3:13). One reason why this sin-cursed earth has not yet been destroyed is God's common grace restraining His inevitable final judgment until the appointed time.

Murray on Common Grace and Its Limits: Common grace *"is every favour of whatever kind or degree, falling short of salvation, which this undeserving and sin-cursed world enjoys at the hand of God"* (Common Grace, 96). Murray reminds us that *"the good attributed to unregenerate men is after all only relative good. It is not good in the sense of meeting in motivation, principle and aim the requirements of God's law and the demands of his holiness"* (Common Grace, 107). Such "relative goods" cannot meet the righteous standards and demands of God. All operations of "common grace" are non-saving, beneficial to those who receive it, but totally unable to produce new life in Christ.

Berkhof's Comment on What Common Grace Does: Common grace *"curbs the destructive power of sin, maintains in a measure the moral order of the universe, thus making an orderly life possible, distributes in varying degrees gifts and talents among men, promotes the development of science and art, and showers untold blessings upon the children of men."* (Systematic Theology, 434).

Some Benefits of Common Grace: Murray says God endows all people with gifts, talents, and opportunities they don't deserve. God grants *"gifts, talents, and aptitudes; he stimulates them with interest and purpose to the practice of virtues, the pursuance of worthy tasks, and the cultivation of arts and sciences that occupy the time, activity and energy of men and that make for the benefit and civilization of the human race. He ordains institutions for the protection and promotion of right, the preservation of liberty, the advance of knowledge and the improvement of physical and moral conditions. We may regard these interests, pursuits and institutions as exercising both an expulsive and impulsive influence. Occupying the energy, activity and time of men they prevent the indulgence of less noble and ignoble pursuits and*

they exercise an ameliorating, moralizing, stabilizing and civilizing influence upon the social organism”(Common Grace, 102–03).

Biblical Examples of Common Grace: Genesis 39:5, *“From the time that he (Potiphar) made him (Joseph) overseer in his house and over all that he had, the Lord blessed the Egyptian's house for Joseph's sake; the blessing of the Lord was on all that he had, in house and field.”*

At Lystra, Paul, speaking to unbelievers in Acts 14:17 declared, *“Yet he (God) did not leave himself without witness, for he did good by giving you rains from heaven and fruitful seasons, satisfying your hearts with food and gladness.”*

Jesus, in Matthew 5:45-46, speaking to a Jewish crowd said, *“But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, ⁴⁵ so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust.”*

Jesus, in Luke 6:35 says, *“But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.”* Common grace is God’s kindness even to ungrateful and evil people.

Common Grace and the Material Creation: As a consequence of the Fall, God placed a curse on His material creation which we call “nature.” God’s restraint on destructive tendencies in nature, which are a part of the curse of sin, is common grace. John Murray addresses that point: *“Sin introduces disintegration and disorganization in every realm. While it is true that only in the sphere of rationality does sin have meaning – it originates in mind, it develops in mind, it resides in mind – yet sin works out disastrous effects outside the sphere of the rational and moral as well as within it. God places restraint upon these effects, he prevents the full development of this disintegration. He brings to bear upon this world in all its spheres correcting and preserving influences so that the ravages of sin might not be allowed to work out the full measure of their destructive power”* (Common Grace, 101).

As Paul says in Romans 8:19-23, *“For the creation waits with eager longing for the revealing of the sons of God. For the creation was subjected to futility, not willingly, but because of him who subjected it, in hope ²¹ that the creation itself will be set free from its bondage to corruption and obtain the freedom of the glory of*

the children of God. ²² For we know that the whole creation has been groaning together in the pains of childbirth until now. ²³ And not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the firstfruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly as we wait eagerly for adoption as sons, the redemption of our bodies.”

Paul’s point is the entire material creation was degraded by sin’s curse but, at the right time, God will free creation from its bondage to corruption. Believers, who now suffer the effects of the curse of sin, will be fully redeemed, made entirely free of sin, including redemption of their bodies.

Because of God's common grace, the biblical worldview acknowledges there is goodness in the world of non-believers despite its evil.

Two Examples About “What is True” versus “What Seems to be True”:

Our Lord Jesus spoke the parable of the **Wheat and Tares** and gave other examples to remind believers of the care they must use in distinguishing between what is true and what merely appears at first to be true.

Parable of the Wheat and Tares (Matthew 13:24-39, 36-43): The parable of the Wheat and Tares shows we are not capable, by their actions and speech, of distinguishing between true believers and those who seem to be believers but are not. Several New Testament passages identify people in the church (even in leadership positions) who are not what they claim to be. For example Ananias and Sapphira (Acts 5:1-3), false teachers (2 Peter 2:1-2), church leaders (3 John 9-11), Hymenaeus and Alexander (1 Timothy 1:18-20), and false apostles at Ephesus (Revelation 2:2).

Tares are weeds which closely resemble wheat in early growth stages. Tares bear “grain heads” somewhat like wheat, but the “fruit” of the tare is bitter and inedible. In the parable, a wheat field was deliberately polluted by an enemy who sowed tare seeds to mix with the wheat. The wheat and tares grow and develop together virtually indistinguishable. When the plants reached a stage where the two could be distinguished, the farmer's servants asked if they should remove the tares.

“But he said, ‘No, lest in gathering the weeds you root up the wheat along with them. ³⁰ Let both grow together until the harvest, and at harvest time I will tell the reapers, “Gather the weeds first and bind them in bundles to be burned, but gather the wheat into my barn”’” (Matthew 13:29-30).

In Matthew 13:37-43 Jesus explained the meaning of the parable.

“The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man. ³⁸ The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, ³⁹ and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰ Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹ The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, ⁴² and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³ Then the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.”

Jesus clearly states He has no intention of rooting out false believers from genuine ones until the end. What He will not do, we cannot do. That means true believers must learn to live with “tares.” That is a sobering observation and warning.

Another Comment by Jesus on this Topic (Matthew 7:15-23):

“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves. ¹⁶ You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A healthy tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a diseased tree bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus you will recognize them by their fruits. ²¹ “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² On that day many will say to me, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and cast out demons in your name, and do many mighty works in your name?’ ²³ And then will I declare to them, ‘I never knew you; depart from me, you workers of lawlessness.’”

Tares are lawless. The overarching measure of genuine belief in Christ and His Gospel is not what is said, but the “fruit” of actions. The true believer is one who obediently does the will of the Father. Talk costs nothing and may be deliberately misleading. Producing the fruit of righteousness may be dangerous but is a true indication of commitment to Christ.

Next: Values, Virtues, Ethics and Morals.