

## Digging Deeper : Common Grace?

Beware! In 1924 a dispute over the idea of common grace caused a major split in the US Christian Reformed Church.

Grace is normally understood as the unmerited act of God in redeeming, sanctifying and glorifying his people. It is only shown to those whom God elects to eternal life. This is part of the teaching of the Church of England.

Some people call this “special grace” and distinguish it from **common grace** which, they say, is shown by God to all people. Ways in which they may be shown are God’s care for creation (Heb 1.2-3) and all people (Mtt 5.45). God also restrains the full effects of sin including through those in authority (Rom 13.1). God also seems to give all a sense of right and wrong (Rom 1.20).

The problem is that the Bible does not seem to call these this grace and normally people speak of them as the ordinary providence of God. In 1924 some feared that using the word grace like this indicated a shift from Biblical teaching. They also felt it not only sounded like but was close to the idea of “common sufficient grace”.

“**Common sufficient grace**” (or “common prevenient grace”) was a term used by Arminians. They said that sin condemns us and stops us turning to God. However, by God’s grace we are freed from the power of sin and given the ability to turn to God. Nevertheless it is our own free decision to turn. This view was opposed by Calvinists who saw it as unbiblical - we are saved by grace through faith, and faith is itself the gift of God (Eph 2.8).

Discuss!

The Arminian-Calvinist dispute was an issue in the Church of England from the early 1600s. In the mid 1700s it came to the fore because John and Charles Wesley were Arminian (as was later Methodism) whilst George Whitfield and other leaders of the evangelical revival were not. One classic and solid work, written by Augustus Toplady (author of the hymn “Rock of Ages”) has the snappy title “Historic Proof of the Doctrinal Calvinism of the Church of England”.

*David Phillips, May 2012*

## The Fruit of the Spirit is ... kindness ...

Bible Study 5 on Gal 5.22-23



The original word for this fruit is *chrestotes* meaning kindness. In other places it is translated as goodness, which would be confusing in Galatians because of the next fruit. The related adverb is ‘kind’ or ‘good’ and verb ‘to be kind’. In one place it is translated ‘easy’.

There are no single passages that help give us a large mouthful of this fruit to taste what it is like so we will take a nibble from various places.

This word is used in Greek translations of the Old Testament and then almost always to describe the character of God.

### Read Luke ch 6 vv 27-36.

Who does Jesus say that God shows his kindness to?

In what ways does God show this kindness? (One example is given in Matthew ch 5 v 45 which is a similar saying of Jesus.)

In verse 35 Jesus says we should be sons of the Most High - because we are imitating the Father. In what ways in this verse does Jesus suggest that we should do this and what does this mean in our everyday lives?

Are there situations where you have found this particularly difficult, or impossible to do?

What similar things does Jesus say in the other verses we have read and again what does it mean in practical situations we face?

### Read Titus ch 3 vv 1-8

(You may also want to look at Romans 2.4 where the kindness and patience of God are both mentioned.)

In verse 3 Paul describes what we once were. Do you think this is in any way a fair description of your past or it is unduly harsh?

In the gospels Jesus makes it clear that it is not just our actions but our thoughts and the desires of our heart that count. Does this affect how we see ourselves in the light of what Paul writes in verse 3?

From what we above from Luke 6 how did God show his kindness to us even when we were far from God? If you are conscious of a time when you were not a Christian can you also look back and see other ways in which God was showing his kindness even then?

What does Paul say here about what we did to deserve God's kindness? Is this something you find easy to accept and do you think it is a stumbling block for some people?

What does Paul say in verses 1 and 8 that he wants people 'to do'? How does this follow on from the kindness that God has shown to us?

In the same way as we looked at the passage from Luke what does this mean in our own lives? What should we do?

In verse 7 Paul speaks of us being heirs and of our hope. Therefore though we are in the world we also have an eternal perspective to life. Are there ways in which showing kindness or doing good might seem to disadvantage us in this life? (Think about Jesus' words about loving our enemies in Luke 6, or the consequence of obeying rulers and authorities - including the tax-man!)

How does having an eternal perspective help us in showing kindness and doing good even if it leads to a disadvantage now?

(Other verses that speak of God's kindness to us are Eph 2.7, Rom 11.22 and 1 Pt 2.3.)

### Read 1 Corinthians ch 15 v 33.

If you are doing well for time you may like to read a few verses either side too. Some translations have the word 'good' in this verse to translate *chrestos*. The verse appears to contain a quotation from the now lost work by the Greek dramatist Menander.

What does this verse therefore suggest is a potential hindrance to us cultivating the fruit of kindness? Are there situations where you can see this danger in your own life and if so what should you do about it?

(Again if you have time you may like to look at Galatians ch 5 vv 16-26 and reflect on how a similar issue is reflected in how Paul speaks about all the fruit of the Spirit.)

### Read Ephesians ch 4 v 32

What particular way does Paul say here that we should show this fruit?

Finally, we have the verse where *chrestos* is sometimes translated as "easy". If the struggle of life sometimes makes it hard to show this fruit of kindness then remember Jesus' promise:

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is kind (*chrestos*) and my burden is light."  
Matthew 11.28-30.