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**Biblical Principles in the
Public Square: Theological
Foundations for Christian
Civic Participation**



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Pro mundis

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Biblical Principles in the Public Square: Theological Foundations for Christian Civic Participation

Thomas K. Johnson

A couple months ago I had the great privilege of presenting a special lecture at a Czech government conference on family policy. In this special lecture I argued that certain foundational values are extremely important because they should shape the actions of government, family, and business in relation to children. I claimed that responsible people should make certain value decisions which will lead to a series of actions, feelings, and reactions in personal relationships, government policy, and business planning. These value decisions include seeing children fundamentally as gifts, not as problems; deciding to practice family loyalty, meaning not abandoning one's children or spouse; and consciously trying to practice a combination of unconditional love and structured justice, which should be a human reflection or image of the combination of God's grace and God's law.

In this special lecture I decided not to initially emphasize the fact that I am a Christian and an evangelical pastor, but this was not a cowardly effort to hide my core identity and belief structure. I was there in the role of a moral philosopher

who has something significant to contribute to the discussion of values and family life, regardless of the religion or beliefs of each of the people at the conference. But what I said was very consciously shaped by a set of evangelical theological beliefs that should, I think, inform the participation of Christians in discussions of values and moral principles in the public square. My philosophy, including my philosophy of family values and public life, is self-consciously a result of my theology; this is not the result of me being some type of religious fanatic; it is a normal but often unrecognized part of the human condition that our ultimate beliefs about the nature of the universe exercise extensive influence over our penultimate or secondary beliefs and convictions in the everyday realms of family, child raising, education, and public policy. I would hope that my ultimate convictions slowly became clear to some of the people who heard my lecture, though many people at the conference may not have perceived the deeper principles that underlie what I said. While I did not initially emphasize my Christian faith

in this lecture, I did not leave my faith at home; I was practicing what I would call an indirect or implicit apology for the Christian faith.

The theological principles which guided this lecture on family values are, I believe, worthy of clarification for other Christians who are called to active participation in the public discussion of values and moral principles. In this essay, I am inviting the reader to join me in the theological research laboratory, to consider some deep background theological convictions that led me to this manner of cultural and political engagement.

In a certain sense, all Christians are called to engagement with “the world,” the whole pattern of cultures in partial rebellion against God, because Jesus wants us to be “in the world” but not “of the world.” Jesus did not ask us to somehow leave or withdraw from the world, which would probably be impossible, since the sin, unbelief, pride, and ingratitude which make “the world” so objectionable to God reside deep within us. We cannot withdraw from “the world,” because we tend to take the world with us wherever we go. But Jesus warned us seriously not to be conformed to the world as it is, since our world is so deeply influenced by sin and misbelief. Unless we are in a situation of very serious persecution, a “fight or flight” relation to society is probably not wise. We should see ourselves as sent by God into the world as people who both hear and carry God’s Word of law and gospel. Once we see ourselves in this

way, we will begin to understand that our Christian faith has a multifaceted relation to the many cultures in which we live and in which we both hear and proclaim the biblical message.

One of the relations of the biblical message to any secular culture is that of contributing to that culture in the realm of moral values and ethical principles. Many of the better characteristics of several cultures around the world are partly the result of 2000 years of history during which many biblical values and principles have been given to those cultures. Christians have not only cared for the helpless, freed the slaves, and fed the poor; believers have also articulated their moral reasons for doing these sorts of things, and these moral reasons have often become a gift from the Body of Christ to the rest of the culture, thereby making decisive contributions to the moral reasoning and practice of multiple cultures around the world. In light of this distinguished history, we, as Christians, should learn how to articulate our central moral beliefs more effectively within the public square so that we consciously contribute to and influence public action, policies, and attitudes; in addition to influencing our cultures, this type of effort should also render many of our biblically influenced moral concerns more understandable to our non-believing neighbors, perhaps reducing their resistance to the gospel of salvation in Christ. Learning to publicly articulate our central moral convictions should, I think, be a high educational priority for believers serving

in education or church leadership, but it should also be seen as important for believers serving in business leadership or in government. For the glory of God and for the good of our communities, there are some things we need to learn. This essay is an introduction to this field of study. It will be outlined around a series of theological/ethical principles that can inform our participation in public discussions of values and moral principles.

I People generally know more about right and wrong than they will initially admit to knowing

In Romans 1:32 the apostle Paul made an astonishing claim about moral knowledge. After listing a whole set of inappropriate behaviors, such as envy, murder, slander, deceit, and gossip, he said, “Although they know God’s righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.” The profundity of his thought may require a moment’s reflection for proper understanding. He is saying that people generally truly know a tremendous amount about right and wrong, and this knowledge is true knowledge that comes from God, but at the same time, in an act of terrible self-contradiction, these same people will approve the actions they know to be wrong and talk as if they do not know that these actions are

wrong. This is part of the self-deceiving self-contradiction of the unbeliever. On the one hand, he/she cannot carry on everyday life without knowing a certain amount about right and wrong, for all of our everyday interactions with other people assume we all know we should not murder, lie, and steal; and by means of his general revelation, God provides enough moral knowledge to all people so that people have the moral knowledge needed for everyday life. But on the other hand, such moral knowledge is terrifying, since it is not simply moral information about how to treat other people; it is also the knowledge that our common failure to follow the moral law requires God’s condemnation.

This situation puts tremendous spiritual stress on the unbeliever, and this spiritual stress leads to a number of different self-deceiving intellectual moves, unless the person is willing to fall before God and cry, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” By calling these moves “intellectual” I am not implying that this is somehow the sort of thing most normally done by scholars and philosophers; taxi drivers and factory workers probably think the same things as professors and school teachers, while using a slightly different vocabulary. I call them “intellectual moves” because they have to do with ways of thinking.

One of the most common of these intellectual moves in our time is moral relativism, which simply denies that there is any real moral law and therefore claims there is no objective right and wrong. Any feelings about right

and wrong, it is said, are only related (in this sense, relative) to a particular person or culture, and therefore they are not based on any universal moral law. It is worth observing that while our philosophy can be relativistic, life is not relativistic. There are moral norms which we encounter everyday in every relationship. Even the man with a strongly relativistic philosophy may not talk like a relativist if you steal his car or sleep with his wife or girlfriend. And without doing anything so stupid, there are things one can say or do to help people break out of their moral relativism. The main point here is that moral relativism is one common intellectual move in reaction to the spiritual stress of knowing (but not wanting to know) that breaking God's law deserves God's wrath.

A second common intellectual move to avoid this stress is the secularization of ethics. Since the Enlightenment, it has been very common to think of ethics as having nothing to do with God. Some moral theories have said ethics is simply a matter of our rational duty; others say ethics is a matter of the social contract, the formal or informal agreements which hold society together in good order; many say ethics is simply a matter of what actions or policies lead to good results for people; and today it is popular to say that ethics has to do with reaching human potential. There is surely a valuable bit of truth in each of these theories, but what is common to them all is to forget about any relation between the moral law and God.

Each of these common moral theories allows people to talk about right and wrong while pretending to forget God's decree that people who do certain things deserve death. Such moral theories may help people to be good citizens and good neighbors, practicing a kind of active, civil righteousness (called "Righteousness No. 1" below), but at the same time such theories seem to be a way to reduce spiritual stress by saying people know less about right and wrong than they really do.

A third common intellectual move to reduce moral/spiritual stress is to try to reduce our recognition of our moral obligations before God down to something which we can claim to follow. The ethical maxim, "If I should, then I can," is an expression of a heart and mind that does not want to recognize the depths of God's demand on our lives. If people deceive themselves into thinking they have followed whatever moral demands they encounter, then they also may convince themselves they do not deserve death, if God does happen to exist. The attempt to substantially reduce the moral demand which we all face is a common human phenomenon. It is part of the attempt to reduce spiritual stress without asking for God's forgiveness.

In all discussions of fundamental moral values and principles in the public square, Christians need to be aware of the conflicted nature of moral knowledge among unbelievers. The problem is not really that they lack moral information. The problem is spiritual stress

which results from knowing more about God's demand and God's law than they want to know; this stress often leads to a range of intellectual moves or mental tricks to reduce moral/spiritual stress, which can make such discussions very complicated.

2 There is harmony between the content of God's special revelation and God's general revelation

We generally call the Bible God's special revelation, meaning those promises and that information which God made known to believers in a special way over the centuries and which has been faithfully preserved for our benefit in written form in the Scriptures. In contrast, God's general revelation is his "speech" through the entirety of his creation (which includes human reason and feelings, which reflect the image of God). There are significant differences between the two forms of revelation, both in terms of content and in terms of means of human learning. The Bible, God's special revelation, does not provide detailed information about plant genetics or the characteristics of the various planets; for that detailed information I must rely on the general revelation of truth from God through his creation which is perceived and organized by natural science. And general revelation in creation does not tell me very much, if anything, about God's offer of forgiveness in Christ; for that

information I must rely on the special revelation of truth from God which comes to us through the Bible. Obviously we make many mistakes in our attempts to understand both general revelation and special revelation, but if we understand both correctly, they will agree, since both convey truth that comes from God. Ultimately, all truth comes from God, and truth is God's opinion on a question. There will be no final conflict between a properly understood general revelation and a properly understood special revelation; but to say there is no *final* conflict between a properly understood general revelation and a properly understood special revelation implies there may be many *intermediate* conflicts between our understandings of general and special revelation, some of which will be mistaken.

The moral law occupies a somewhat strange position because *both* general revelation *and* special revelation constantly present us with the demands of God's law. When I read the Bible, I am very directly confronted with God's commands. But when I pay any significant attention to human experience and human relationships, I am also confronted with moral demands which the believer can recognize to be God's demands, as they come to me via his general revelation. Many areas of knowledge deal either mostly with general revelation or mostly with special revelation. A book on the meaning of the cross of Christ will be properly focused on special revelation, whereas a book on the proper use of a medical

diagnostic technique might properly only use God's general revelation. But a comprehensive book on ethics and moral knowledge will have to analyze knowledge we receive both via general revelation and special revelation, because God's moral law is extensively revealed in both modes of revelation. For that reason, scholars in the study of Christian ethics might also be philosophers or sociologists as well as students of the Bible, and they cannot stop considering questions of the interconnections of faith and different types of learning.

Of course, in our time it is the demands of God's law as it comes to us through God's general revelation that many people prefer to try to ignore, since most of our neighbors have little, if any, contact with the biblical revelation. Even people who claim to be Christians often have very little effective contact with the biblical revelation. This fact should inform how we talk about God's law within our secular society. We should regularly mention the multifaceted character of our moral knowledge. For example, I know that my wife and children need real loyalty from me, and this knowledge comes from the relationships as well as from the Bible. I know that my colleagues need real honesty from me, and this moral demand comes from those relationships as well as from the Bible. I know that my neighbors should expect justice from me, and this knowledge comes from civic relationships as well as from the Bible. As a believer, my

moral knowledge is a complete unity of what I have learned through both general and special revelation. And my non-Christian neighbors have some of the same knowledge, which they have received via God's general revelation. But that knowledge is not completed, confirmed, and reformulated by means of God's special revelation, which would also change partly rejected knowledge into fully accepted knowledge.

For this reason, when people read the moral commands of God in the Bible, commands like "you shall not steal; you shall murder; you shall not commit adultery," they do not exactly receive new information. They hear in explicit written and oral form what they probably already knew, though their previous knowledge may have been less well-clarified and perhaps partly rejected. The moral law which comes from God has a prominent place in both general and special revelation. If properly understood, there will be harmony between our understanding of the moral demands in both general and special revelation, since the moral law comes from God, but it reaches us in two ways. For many believers, this harmony of the two ways of encountering the moral law is so deep and uniform that they rarely observe that we encounter God's law in two ways.

This harmony does not in any way make the special revelation of God's law less important. As mentioned, there is extreme value in having his law written on stone in a public manner. And the special revelation of God's

law always sets his law in close contact with the various promises of God and especially the gospel of God's grace in Christ; this changes everything about our relationship to the moral law. In the most profound possible way, the special revelation of God's law (with the revelation of his grace in Christ) renews our previous knowledge of his law which came via general revelation. In the terms used by older theology, "grace restores nature;" in my terminology, the special revelation of God's moral law restores our broken understanding of the moral law which we previously received via his general revelation. But this does not eliminate the importance of understanding the way in which God is still revealing his moral law through creation to all people.

This harmony between the two forms of revelation of God's law is crucial background for public discussions of moral values and principles. Our neighbors who are not Christians may not know the Bible and basic Christian doctrines, but at some deep level they will normally have some awareness of the fact of a moral demand, and they will probably have some awareness of the content of that moral demand. And like it or not, they will probably be bothered by the feeling that these demands come from God. The central content of biblical moral demands will often be partly present in their minds and hearts, even if they do not like it. And in a cultural context that is consciously post-Christian, our neighbors may have deeply troubled or conflicted

feelings about the entire Christian tradition which are connected with their troubled relationship with the general revelation of God's moral law.

3 We should distinguish among the different uses of God's moral law

Historically, Protestants have distinguished among different uses or functions of God's moral law in the lives of people. Without going into this rich history, we can note that three functions or uses of God's moral law have received prominent attention from the classical Protestant moral writers. Both the general revelation of God's law and the special revelation of God's moral law have these three uses. They are: 1. the theological or condemning/convicting use of God's law; 2. the civil or political use of God's moral law; and 3. the moral law of God as a guide for the Christian life of gratitude.

The theological or condemning use of God's law has to do with our awareness of our sin and guilt before God. "Through the law we become conscious of sin." (Romans 3:20) By means of the moral law, we become aware that we are sinners before a holy God, and in this sense, it is by means of the moral law that we get to know ourselves. Maybe the law says, "You shall not covet," and we recognize that we constantly covet. Maybe the law says, "You shall not steal," and we recognize ourselves as thieves. Or maybe the entire

law prompts a reaction in us, so that we have to recognize that sometimes we want things and do things simply because they are wrong. Then we are pushed by the law to see our need for forgiveness in Christ. The law pushes us to see our need for the gospel, to cry out, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” And this occurs not only at the beginning of the life of faith, when we first believe the gospel; this relation to the law in its condemning function continues through a lifetime of faith, pushing us to repeatedly renew our trust in the gospel of Christ. Some churches make this process of recognizing our sin and rehearing the gospel an important part of weekly worship. As long as we have any sinful tendencies remaining, we need God’s moral law to condemn and convict us, to drive us again to trust in the gospel. In this sense, the law always condemns.

The second use of the law has sometimes been forgotten among evangelicals. The moral law has the possibility of restraining sin to the point of making a largely humane life in society possible. This is called the civil or political or civilizing function of God’s moral law. Why is it that most people do not usually freely follow all of their worst instincts? Why is it that much of the world enjoys the great benefit of civilized life together, even though our sinful nature can so easily lead to the “war of all against all?” People do not usually become as terrible as they might possibly become because of some type of moral restraint. This moral restraint

will often be complex in nature, partly consisting of cultural expectations and government laws, partly consisting in habits learned at home, school, or work, partly consisting in moral principles, rules, and values. God’s law is built into creation in such a way that it is an unavoidable part of the creation order, even if people do not like it, claim not to know that a moral law exists, and claim to be atheists. And even if people reduce the demands of God’s law to the point that it is something easy to follow, this vastly reduced or twisted moral understanding generally has a positive and civilizing effect in human life. It makes a partly humane civilization possible. Even if the moral law in this civil or civilizing function does not reflect God’s moral law with 100% purity, it may still be enough to significantly improve the behavior of individuals and an entire society.

Believers should not only be aware of the way in which God’s law in its civilizing function influences us; we also need to become very conscious of the way in which the Body of Christ is one of God’s means of making his law effective within a particular culture. For 2000 years, Christians have contributed a wide range of biblically informed moral values, principles, examples, and theories to many different cultures; this has had a profound effect on what people regard as proper and civilized behavior. Something very similar happened through God’s Jewish people in the time before the birth of the Christian church. Awareness of

these historical facts should influence our understanding of the calling of the Body of Christ in society today.

The third use of the moral law is that of providing a guide for believers for how to live a life of gratitude to God for his gifts of creation and salvation. The person who is justified before God by faith, who is aware of forgiveness and a new status as an adopted child of God, faces the important question, “How do I properly show my gratitude to God?” At least part of the answer is to follow God’s commands as we receive them in the Bible and in general revelation. For example, instead of desiring to kill, steal, lie, or commit adultery, I must really want to protect life, protect assets, protect truth, and protect marriage and turn these renewed desires into actions as part of a life of gratitude to God for his gifts of life and grace. In this way, the law of God plays an important role in the authentically Christian life, the life of faith; the moral law of God is part of the core structure of the life of gratitude.

What we must not miss is my claim that it is the same moral law of God, encountered in both general and special revelation, which is used in all the uses of God’s law. This means that there is a large degree of similarity between actions resulting from the civilizing use of the law and the use of God’s law as a guide to gratitude. A person who is an atheist or agnostic may be very careful to tell the truth very consistently, and his/her explanation of that action may be something like, “We have a rational

duty to tell the truth,” or “If I ever say anything false, no one will trust me.” These are partial but good explanations of why truth telling is important which arise from the way God’s moral law is built into human life and experience. In this way, the general revelation of God’s law pushes people toward a more humane and civilized way of life, showing the effectiveness of the civilizing use of God’s moral law. Another person who is a serious Christian also is very serious about consistently telling the truth, and his/her explanation of that action may be something like “Truth telling glorifies God because God is truthful,” or “Truth telling shows my gratitude to God, because he commands truthfulness.” For this person, the special revelation of God’s law provides guidance for the life of gratitude, which we numbered the third use of God’s law. In terms of the outward action, there will be a very significant similarity between the actions of the two people, that of truth telling, while there will simultaneously be a huge element of difference regarding internal meaning and motivation. In this case, the atheist is trying to be a good person, neighbor, and citizen, whereas the believer is trying to glorify God in gratitude for his gifts, which should also lead to being a good neighbor and a good citizen.

4 There is compatibility and difference among the different types of righteousness

Since the time of Martin Luther, it has been common for Protestants to distinguish different types of righteousness, for example, the difference between the active righteousness of following God's law and the passive righteousness which comes by faith in the promise of the gospel. This distinction was sometimes described as a contrast between civil righteousness and spiritual righteousness, though that way of talking might lead some to the problem of thinking that faith and civic affairs have little or nothing in common. For that reason, it is probably better not to make a strong contrast between civic and spiritual righteousness an important part of our thinking.

In the discussion of ethics in the public square, we should make a distinction between two types of righteousness, both of which are active and civic though they have very different motivations and spiritual directions. Finding good terminology may be quite difficult. Righteousness No. 1, in this distinction, is being a good neighbor and a good citizen because of a partly positive response to the general revelation of God's law, partly because of other ways in which biblical moral principles have been included within a culture or a person's self-expectations. This person might deny that the moral law comes from God or claim to be uncertain

about this question; he or she might significantly reduce what the moral law demands so that it is far easier to fulfill; this person may articulate an ethical theory that seems rather insufficient; and yet this person may be, in certain ways, a good citizen and a good neighbor. Righteousness No. 2, in this distinction, is attempting to "do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God" in conscious, believing response to God's gifts of creation and redemption. This person wants to genuinely love God and his neighbors in obedience to all of God's commands, motivated by gratitude for God's grace, with a heart filled with faith in all of God's promises. This is the difference between a somewhat positive response to God's law in its civilizing use and the completely positive response to both the gospel and the special revelation of God's law. This strange terminology, Righteousness 1 and Righteousness 2, is intended to show both the significant similarity and the radical difference between these two types of active, civic righteousness.

The similarities between Righteousness No. 1 and Righteousness No. 2: in practice, the two types of righteousness will include very similar actions, as described above in the illustration of truth telling. Both of these types of active, civic-minded righteousness will include honesty, loyalty, mercy, and a deep concern for fairness or justice. Both types of righteousness should include a real concern for matters of the common good, including economic,

political, medical, environmental, and educational concerns. Both types of active righteousness should include real concern for many family values, including love for children and loyalty to one's spouse. Both types of righteousness are radically different from a life of crime, negligence, irresponsibility, laziness, cruelty, dishonesty, corruption, and general delinquency. Both types of active righteousness would lead to real improvements in the everyday world and contribute to justice, peace, and mercy.

But we must not minimize the radical differences between these two types of righteousness. Somewhere Augustine observes that the virtues of the pagans are glorious vices. By this he probably meant that the virtues of the pagans, which I have called "Righteousness No. 1," are ultimately motivated by love of self, not love of God. A really smart person will not love himself by a life of crime and obvious vice; a really smart person may love himself and give full expression to his arrogant pride by a life of seemingly humble public service for the common good. This is a truly glorious vice.

Martin Luther observed that there is deep in the human heart a desire to justify ourselves before God, in effect to tell God that the gospel of Christ is not needed, since we can justify or cleanse ourselves; and this desire, Luther thought, is mixed into all our normal "rational" considerations of the moral demands built into creation. Of course, he thought, it is much better for

our life in society to be governed by the rational consideration of good laws and principles than for our life in society to be governed by irrational passions like revenge, prejudice, or greed. And this is possible, Luther thought, because God has built his moral law into creation and into human reason. But this type of active righteousness, which I have called Righteousness No. 1, may sometimes promote the most fundamental of all theological mistakes, that of thinking we can earn our salvation before God, so that the gospel of Christ is not needed.

In our time, we can easily observe another deep weakness in most common varieties of Righteousness No. 1. Our world is filled with a whirlwind of competing ideologies, religions, and worldviews, many of which contain ideas which substantially reduce or twist the perception of the moral law which God built into creation and reason. Whether it is an ideology that says the unborn or the disabled are not human, that says marriage is not important, or that gives a strange religious justification for murder or lying, the minds of people are filled with ideas and beliefs that make it more difficult for them to respond positively to the general revelation of God's moral law. This leads to the religious or philosophical attempts to justify actions that seem totally repugnant in light of the biblical revelation, e.g., abortion, easy divorce, cohabitation, temporary marriages, jihad, and deception. The biblical revelation needs to play an important role in our moral thinking

to help us avoid the various types of religious and philosophical deception that so easily cloud the moral thinking of many. Without the influence of special revelation, Righteousness No. 1 can very easily go astray.

5 Both common grace and special grace are truly grace

It has long been the practice for evangelical Christians to distinguish between two types of grace which come from God, his common grace and his special grace. Special grace has to do with salvation, eternal life, and the forgiveness of sins. Common grace has to do with all those things that make life in this world possible. A favorite biblical explanation of common grace is in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus taught us, “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, that you may be sons of our Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.” (Matthew 5: 44, 45) Our love for our enemies should image or reflect our Father’s love for his enemies, to whom he graciously provides those things needed for daily life. Since we need some good way to describe this work of God, why not call it “common grace?”

On God’s side, this common grace is part of his call to repentance. In his evangelistic sermon in Lystra, the apostle Paul claimed God “has not left himself without testimony: He

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) And in Romans 2:4, Paul completed the thought: “Do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, not realizing that God’s kindness leads you toward repentance?” The kindness of God, joined with the human appreciation of the kindness of God, should lead people to repentance and faith.

This common grace of God seems to stand in a serious relationship to the common wrath of God. (The common wrath of God should be contrasted with multiple types of particular wrath, as well as contrasted with the eschatological wrath of God, each of which we see described in the Bible in different places. God’s wrath is always truly just and is never arbitrary. It is displayed in several ways.) The biblical description of the wrath of God which I have most seriously studied is that in Romans 1:18–32. Of course, there is much biblical teaching about the wrath of God that does not appear within this text. What is striking in this text is the way in which the common wrath of God is depicted. The major theme of this text is that of the current revelation of the wrath of God within history. Paul writes, “The wrath of God is being revealed.” His language points to an ongoing, current work of God’s wrath in the world. And at three points in the following paragraphs he describes this wrath in greater detail. In verse 24 he says, “God gave them over in the sinful

desires of their hearts.” In verse 26 he says, “God gave them over to shameful lusts.” And in verse 28 he says, “He gave them over to a depraved mind.” In each of these three statements, the wrath of God is demonstrated by letting people become more sinful in action. It is an act of God’s wrath when he lets people follow more of the sinful desires within their sinful hearts.

It is not explicitly stated in this text, but it would strongly seem to follow that one of the works of God’s common grace, in strict contrast with this work of his common wrath, is to restrain sin. When the sinful tendencies of a person or a culture are restrained, we should thank God; and then we should probably remember that this restraint of sin is a work of God’s common grace, regardless of what secondary means God has used to bring about such a restraint of sin. And the common grace of God is intended to lead people to repentance and faith. Without the restraint of human evil, society can easily degenerate into the war of all against all, so that an entire society seems to self-destruct. The restraint of human self-destruction is as much a work of God’s common grace as is the sending of rain and sun.

Such a restraint of sin will often result in what I earlier called Righteousness No. 1. The person who benefits from such sin-restraining common grace might still profess ideas and be motivated by desires that are not God-honoring. But whatever cultural, religious, personal, political, or economic motives are involved, it is by God’s common

grace that people restrain sin and practice any type of righteousness. This common grace of God was assumed by the Apostle Paul in his noted description of human governments in Romans 13. He wrote, “Everyone must submit himself to the governing authorities, for there is no authority except that which God has established. The authorities that exist have been established by God. . . . (The person in authority) is God’s servant to do you good. But if you do wrong, be afraid, for he does not bear the sword for nothing. He is God’s servant, an agent of wrath to bring punishment on the wrongdoer. . . . This is also why you pay taxes, for the authorities are God’s servants.” (from Romans 13:1–6)

By putting a restraint on some of the more destructive sins, the civil authorities are a means of God’s common grace. For that we must be thankful to God and to them by means of doing our part, by practicing our civic duties and paying our taxes. Good civil government is an important means of God’s common grace. To make this truth vivid in our minds we only need to contrast pictures of genocide or violent rioting in the streets with pictures of peaceful argument in a parliament, legislature, or court of law.

By using the word “grace” to describe the gifts of God such as rain, sun, and a peaceful life in society, Christians have recognized that these are undeserved gifts of God. It is common to emphasize that God’s special grace of salvation in Christ, forgiveness of sins, and justification before God by faith arise

from God's grace, his undeserved love and mercy. Those gifts we call common grace are just as much a result of God's grace as those gifts we call special grace. Those gifts of God that make a civilized, peaceful, satisfying daily life possible are as truly the result of God's undeserved love and grace as are the gifts of salvation and forgiveness. But the gifts are very different, so we should distinguish between common grace and special grace.

6 Christians are called to be servants of both special grace and common grace

Jesus said, "Go and make disciples of all nations." (Matthew 28:19) This is the missions mandate or Great Commission; based in Jesus' claim of authority over all peoples and cultures, it has empowered believers with the conviction of the universal importance and relevance of the biblical message. It is a call for believers to become servants of God's special grace.

The call of God to be servants of special grace is connected with God's call to believers to be servants of common grace. In the parable of "The Sheep and the Goats" Jesus taught us, "Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I

was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes, and you clothed me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.' Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for the least of these my brothers of mine, you did for me.' (Matthew 25:34–40)

There can hardly be a more pointed and direct call from Jesus to be imitators of and participants in God's work of common grace. He seems to evaluate our claim to be his followers by looking at whether or not we practice actions that are similar to his Father's common grace. The Father shows his common grace to many of his enemies, made in his image, by giving them rain, sun, and all things needed for life in this world, including good government. He calls us to imitate, reflect, or image him by helping and taking care of the people made in the image of God. There can hardly be a more powerful motivation to become the giving hands of Jesus in relation to a world filled with suffering. Jesus calls us to be servants of his special saving grace and also servants of his common, humanizing and civilizing grace.

There does not seem to be a sharp line between God's common grace that sends rain and sun and God's common grace that restrains sin. Both are works

of God's grace that make life possible but do not immediately lead to salvation or forgiveness of sins. In much of the world today, the need for humanitarian aid arises when the sinful tendencies within the human heart have not been restrained. Too many humanitarian crises are the result of war, violence, economic collapse caused by corruption, or illness caused partly by irresponsible behavior (think of AIDS, often caused by drug use or irresponsible sexual behavior). These humanitarian disasters, which properly move the hearts of believers to compassionate action, have arisen partly because there had been no effective restraint of certain types of sins at an earlier time. How much more compassionate it would be to prevent such humanitarian disasters, by being servants of God's common grace at that earlier time! Or think of the many problems of children, addressed by countless educators, that have arisen because they were abandoned, abused, or neglected by one or both parents. Teachers and school leaders continually see children with medical, neurological, psychological, or learning problems because of the sins of the parents: e.g., alcoholism, drug abuse, father abandonment (single mothers), mother abandonment, physical abuse. Teachers have to become something like humanitarian aid workers to help these children. How much better if the Body of Christ had effectively been served God's common grace at an earlier time, to prevent such human disasters!! If we claim to have received God's special grace, we have to

become imitators of his common grace as well as proclaimers of his special grace.

7 The articulation of humane moral values and principles in the public square is a means of serving God's common grace

We must never forget that God's common, civilizing grace is closely connected with the moral law, whereas his special grace is more closely connected with the gospel. The restraint of sin is never perfect or complete, and this partial restraint of sin can occur when a person or a culture accepts even some parts or aspects of God's moral law. However, the restraint of sin, leading to Righteousness No. 1, will be more effective if a person's or a culture's awareness and accepted perception of the moral law are strengthened. The human perception of the moral law coming through creation is influenced by a wide variety of personal and historical factors. The public witness of the Body of Christ is one of the most important historical and personal factors that influences the common perceptions of the moral law.

One of the ways in which common grace and special grace are similar is that both are mediated partly by means of words. Protestants normally say that God's special grace is mediated to us by "The Means of Grace," the way we usually describe the combination of God's Word (including preaching and teaching

in the churches, schools, and families) and the Sacraments (Baptism and the Holy Supper). And the Sacraments are sometimes further described as “Visible Words.” In this way we emphasize the connection of special grace to words, ultimately the word of the gospel, without minimizing the way in which God’s special grace is also mediated by means of actions. (Obviously the gospel is a report about God’s actions in the birth, death, and resurrection of Christ, a fact which also illustrates the connectedness between words and acts in the realm of God’s special grace.)

In God’s common grace, there may be a different relationship between words and actions. People benefit from the sun and the rain, regardless of the words they use to describe them. But there are very significant ways in which God’s common grace is also mediated to people and cultures by means of words.

Man does not live by bread alone. We live very extensively from our hearts and minds, which means from words, words by which we give expression to ideas, beliefs, values, feelings, attitudes, relationships, and much more. From the words in our minds and hearts arise very different ways of life, for individuals and for entire cultures. The difference between an Adolph Hitler and a Mother Teresa is largely what words and ideas filled their hearts and minds. One set of words and ideas led to National Socialism and the Holocaust; another set of words and ideas led to self-giving love and care for the needy. One set of

words can lead to destructive totalitarianism, whereas another set of words can lead to a humane democracy. Ideas have consequences. And the set of words and ideas shaping the life of a person or the life of a society is never entirely fixed and unchanging. There is usually some possibility of change as a result of what messages are communicated.

Even if people do not believe the gospel of Christ, there is real benefit for individuals and societies if some aspects or dimensions of the total biblical message are accepted, even if that acceptance is partial. Words, slogans, sayings, mottoes, theories, proverbs, and stories can all be means of God’s common grace, ways in which the Creator works in our societies to restrain our sin and sustain a somewhat humane way of life. They can become part of the material of a humane culture, from which then arise our feelings, our actions, and even our public policies. People who believe the gospel of Christ and love their neighbors should jump into the very middle of our various cultures to give a voice to words, slogans, sayings, mottoes, theories, proverbs, and stories that arise from the biblical message and support the biblical message. In this way we can contribute to the cognitive, symbolic, and emotional contents of our cultures in a way that mediates God’s common grace. Believers can contribute to the total direction of our cultures in such a manner that more people are encouraged to imitate Mother Teresa and less people to walk in Hitler’s footsteps. Entire societies can be encouraged and

strengthened to practice higher levels of justice, honesty, loyalty, and mercy.

8 The rich complexity in God's revelation of the moral law provides and enables a wide range of methods of presenting the moral law in society

When one picks up the Bible, he sees a rich complexity and complementarity in the communication of God's moral will. We find commands like "You shall not steal." We see stories or parables, like that of the Good Samaritan. We read histories, like that of the punishment of Israel for their sins. We also find a rich supply of proverbs which instruct us in the way of reflective moral wisdom. This rich pattern of communication may reach its high point in the New Testament instruction to put on the character of Christ as those who have died and risen with him. And in this rich complexity there is also real harmony, so that there is real unity in the total presentation of God's moral will. It is the self-consistent communication of a self-consistent God; therefore, the way of life of the commands fits with the way of life taught in the parables and stories, which also fits the way of life taught by the proverbs. A biblically informed virtue ethic focusing on the way of life taught in the proverbs will not be in conflict with a biblically informed rule ethic that focuses on the way of life taught by the commands;

and neither will be in conflict with a way of life that arises from a biblically informed narrative ethic that focuses our attention on the proper responses to the parables and histories contained in the Bible. There is unity within complexity of communication because of the complementary character of God's special revelation.

There is the same unity within complexity in the general revelation of God's law in creation; the different dimensions of the general, creational revelation of God's law are complementary. Whether or not a person knows much about the Bible, every person in the world encounters a God-given moral demand in a wide variety of ways, some of which have been mentioned above. A few of these ways of encountering the natural moral law can be listed and described. We often have a direct, intuitive sense of what is required of us; for example a father may directly feel that his wife and children need unconditional love and complete loyalty from him, or our encounter with people experiencing pain and suffering may give us a direct moral intuition that we need to practice mercy. This direct, intuitive awareness of a moral duty probably arises from our direct awareness and sense of God and his moral attributes which is partly given in general revelation and which demands that we imitate God's moral attributes because we are made in his image. Another way in which we become aware of a God-given moral demand (though perhaps without a strong awareness that the demand

comes from God) is by means of thinking about predictable consequences; we might ask ourselves, “What will happen to society if everyone lies or steals?” or “What will happen to my relationships with others if I lie or steal?” This type of awareness of God’s moral law arises from the way in which God has created us as relationship-oriented, while God has also built his moral law into the structure of human connectedness. Still a different way in which we become aware of a God-given moral demand is by asking what kind of person I or we are making ourselves if we take a particular action; maybe I am aware that a single impatient act or word is a step toward making me a grumpy, irritable person, which I do not want to be, whereas another action or word will tend to make me into a fair and kind person, worthy of real respect. This type of awareness of a moral demand is also God-given, probably arising from our God-given drive to reach our created potential.

Unbelieving moral philosophy has tended to isolate and absolutize these different ways of encountering the God-given moral law because there is usually not a significant awareness of the unity within complexity of God’s general revelation, which is the source of much moral thinking and acting. This tendency to absolutize one dimension of our encounter with the moral law given in creation gives rise to the range of competing moral philosophies, many of which seek to explain all of moral experience in light of one dimen-

sion of moral experience. Most secular moral philosophies are reductionistic in the sense of reducing our perception of moral experience and moral obligation, because each moral philosophy tends to isolate and absolutize one part of moral experience. If we really believe that we live in God’s created world through which he is continually speaking his moral law, we can easily begin to see that there is a deep unity and complementarity within these different ways of encountering his law in creation. Many believers do this without a second thought; perhaps only those who have read too much secular moral philosophy are aware that this is happening all the time within believing circles.

When we attempt to bring biblically informed moral principles into the public square in our secular societies, we have the freedom to select which dimension of the general revelation of God’s moral law we want to emphasize on that occasion. On some occasions, when speaking for an audience or class which is predominantly made up of people who are not yet Christians, I have emphasized our direct intuitive awareness of certain moral duties like mercy, faithfulness, or honesty. In these situations, I have sounded a little like a follower of intuitionist deontological ethical theory, which absolutizes that way of encountering the moral law of God given in creation. On other occasions, when speaking for an audience or class that is comprised mostly of non-believers, I have chosen to emphasize what kind of person we become as a

result of particular actions. In that situation, I have sounded a little like a virtue moral theorist or a follower of Aristotle, the ethical theory that absolutizes the question of how a series of actions turns us into a certain type of person. And on still other occasions, when speaking to a class of unbelievers, I have focused the attention of my students on the predictable negative or positive results, sometimes demonstrated by studies in the social sciences, that follow from certain practices; for example, I have talked about the significant negative consequences for human well-being that usually flow from divorce and cohabitation. In that situation, I sounded a lot like a follower of rule-utilitarian moral theory, the type of moral theory that wants to derive all moral knowledge from predictable consequences of our actions. As a Christian, I have the freedom to invite people to think about the different dimensions of God's general revelation of his moral law, and a person who only heard a few minutes from one of those lectures might have mistakenly thought, on different days, that I was a virtue moral theorist, an intuitional moral theorist, or a rule utilitarian moral theorist. But my goal has been only to bring my hearers into significant contact with one of the many complementary ways in which we encounter God's moral law revealed through creation. And this has been with the intention of being both a bearer of common grace and also to make God's special revelation and special grace more plausible for a particular audience.

9 The same moral law which restrains sin also convicts of sin and points our neighbors to the gospel

I have argued that believers need to be servants of God's common grace by means of effectively promoting humane moral standards in the public square, moral standards which arise from the general revelation of God's law and are informed by the special revelation of God's law. This process has been occurring for many centuries, and believers should consciously adopt the promotion of Righteousness No. 1 as part of our contribution to our various cultures. We should be consciously looking for suitable opportunities to help our neighbors see that things like telling the truth, protecting human rights, and being loyal to one's spouse and family are truly right and proper and contribute to human well-being. As servants of God's common grace, we should attempt to promote the civil use of the law and encourage adherence to God's law in its civil use.

As we pursue this part of the calling God has given us, we should never forget that God's law always retains all three of its uses: God's law always (1) shows us our sin and need for salvation in Christ; (2) restrains our sin to enable civic righteousness; and (3) is a guide for the life of gratitude toward God for his gifts of creation and redemption. It may be that in a certain situation, one of the uses of God's law is prominent in our minds, but God's law is always

engaging people in at least these three ways. In our discussion of ethics in the public square, we are mostly thinking about civic righteousness as a result of the restraint of sin, the second use of God's moral law; in certain times and places, that should be the main topic of our discussion. But God's law is frequently used by God's Spirit to also accomplish the other purposes of the moral law. And one of these functions is showing people their sinfulness and their need for the gospel of Christ. In this manner, the representation of the general revelation of God's moral law in the public square can also serve a pre-evangelistic function, preparing the way for the gospel. Some examples may help; these examples come primarily from my personal experience, whether teaching philosophy and ethics in secular universities or speaking in government policy conferences. In several situations, I have given lectures or speeches that have emphasized moral principles that lead to a humane way of life, under the blessing of God's common grace, while at the same time I have hoped the Holy Spirit was also using my speeches or lectures to show my hearers their need for forgiveness by faith in our Savior.

In public university lectures, I have argued that governments should not legalize active euthanasia, because we can observe a repeated tendency in human history for people to kill other people while deceiving themselves to think they are doing a good thing while killing someone else. How can we have

any certainty that active euthanasia is not a repetition of this old problem? An astute Christian observer of that lecture would probably notice that this was truly a lecture on public ethics, intended to promote civic righteousness in regard to a particular question, while at the same time that lecture would also tend to show human sinfulness: we are the sort of people who can easily kill others and deceive ourselves about our murderous potential. Whether or not I have mentioned Christ or have explicitly said that we are wrestling with God's law, this lecture would both promote a humane society and also show the need for the gospel. God's law restrains our sin, while it also shows our need for forgiveness.

When teaching university classes on ethics, I have sometimes given a lecture based on studies in the social sciences that show that cohabitation and divorce generally lead to a wide range of negative consequences for all of the people involved, including the children who are conceived in these unions. My mode of reasoning has been consciously rule-utilitarian, asking what rule, if widely observed, would predictably lead to better consequences for the people most directly influenced by that rule. I have suggested that even an intelligent atheist who is honestly concerned about human well-being will follow the traditional Christian rules which require lifetime marriage and keeping sexuality within marriage. An astute Christian observer of such lecture would notice that it really was a serious lecture designed to

promote civic moral responsibility in one of the crucial areas of ethical consideration, using a method of moral reasoning employed by some of the most highly regarded secular moral philosophers; but this lecture was also an apology for the Christian faith. This lecture would have promoted civic righteousness, regardless of the faith or beliefs of the hearers; but for many hearers, it would also expose an area of guilt and the need for forgiveness, while making the biblical message more plausible. The moral law always tends to restrain sin as a means of common grace, while also showing our sin and need for forgiveness in Christ.

In the speech mentioned above on family values for government policy makers, I had chosen to use the language and terminology of a direct intuitive awareness of moral duties that should shape family values in all sectors of life. I decided to use this method of reasoning and presentation because I thought it might be suitable to the situation. My intention was to strengthen the awareness of certain parts of God's moral law in a manner that be used by God's common grace to restrain sin and promote healthy family life; but I was very conscious that God's law always has all of its functions, including guiding believers and showing our sin and need for salvation. It is highly probable that many of my hearers had a history of serious disloyalty to a spouse and children, leading to an awareness of guilt, which is a step toward seeing their need for Christ. My hope is that this lecture

had a pre-evangelistic function in the sense of making a few people aware of their need for the gospel if they would have the opportunity to hear the good news in Christ in the following days or months. God's law, even when presented in a very partial manner, retains all of its important functions, restraining sin as a means of God's common grace, showing our need for forgiveness and special grace in Christ, and giving direction for the life of gratitude in response to God's special and common grace.

10 Comments

Jesus calls his followers to be in the world but not of the world. We are sent into the world as people who continually hear and carry his Word to a needy world. This does not only mean evangelism and seeking converts to Christ as servants of God's special grace; this also requires us to be servants of common grace, which is partly mediated through the civic use of God's moral law. Therefore, we need to learn how to become people who can communicate all or part of God's moral law into our various cultures in suitable ways. Believers have made truly massive contributions in this area for at least 2000 years, and contributing an awareness of God's law to our cultures needs to become an organic part of our understanding of the mission of the Body of Christ in the world. The right words from believers in their positions around the world can

play a significant role in what billions of people decide to do. One set of words can lead people to imitate Adolph Hitler; another set of words can lead people to partly imitate Mother Teresa, even if they do not fully accept her faith. And those words that communicate the moral law which would restrain sin and promote civic righteousness will also tend to point out our sin and our need

for Christ. Therefore, bringing biblical principles into the public square is also a key part of the pre-evangelistic work of the Body of Christ.

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