

have only themselves to blame, and this extension of God's mercy will only aggravate their condemnation. The gracious, strong hand that presently restrains the outpouring of God's wrath is the same hand that will one day hold the scales of justice and wield the sword of execution against incorrigible sinners! God says, "Behold, now is 'the acceptable time,' behold, now is 'the day of salvation.'"

- b. A second important way in which God's general merciful grace has prevented suffering is by God's restraint of the full expression of human depravity.

The Bible teaches that "the heart is more deceitful than all else, and is desperately sick; who can understand it?"

Jesus said, "from within, out of the heart of men, proceed the evil thoughts and fornications, thefts, murders, adulteries, deeds of coveting and wickedness, as well as deceit, sensuality, envy, slander, pride and foolishness. All these evil things proceed from within and defile the man."

Can statements like these really be applied to moral, decent people who would never think of murdering anyone, committing adultery, or stealing anything?

The answer Scripture gives is a most emphatic "Yes!"

But why, then, are most people's lives not characterized by these evil things, at least not outwardly?

Sometimes the thing, humanly speaking, that prevents the inner corruption of most outwardly moral people from being openly expressed is social pressure; or lack of outward temptation; or lack of opportunity; or enlightened self-interest; or fear of being caught, exposed, and subjected to some form of social or legal punishment!

But in addition to these considerations of human expediency, another factor is at work: the restraining influences of the Holy Spirit.

In Genesis 6:3, in a climate in which the wickedness and corruption of human beings had become very great in outward expression, God said, "My Spirit shall not strive with man forever, because he also is flesh." And in II Thessalonians 2:7 Paul writes, "For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only He who now restrains will do so until He is taken out of the way."

Think of how terrible a place the world would be if the Holy Spirit were not restraining the full expression of man's natural corruption! What suffering there would be if human beings were simply let loose from all restraints to satisfy their desires for sinful pleasure, their greed for material possessions, and their sinful