

# Countless Blessings

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

22 December, 2024

## Children's Talk: What Counts?

We are going to talk about counting. That might not seem very Christmasy. But it actually plays an important part of the Christmas story. The Gospel of Luke tells us that,

it came to pass in those days that a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This census first took place while Quirinius was governing Syria. So all went to be registered, everyone to his own city. (Luke 2:1-3)

What that means is that the emperor wanted every person to be counted, so that he could know exactly how many people were under him and how much money he could expect to get from taxing them. To make counting easier, everyone had to go to their hometown. That meant Mary and Joseph had to go to a place called Bethlehem:

Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed wife, who was with child. So it was, that while they were there, the days were completed for her to be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:4-7)

There were so many people coming to Bethlehem that there was no room for Mary and Joseph and so Jesus was born in a stable and place in a manger, a box that the horses and other animals ate hay out of.

So on the one hand, we have an emperor who wants to know how many people he rules over, so that he can gloat and brag about how powerful he is; and on the other hand we have not enough room even for one little baby, Jesus, to be born because there were so many people. Now I said we would talk about counting. The emperor, in counting all the people, was focused on the wrong thing. He only cared about how many people he ruled, and not at all about whether there was room for the Lord.

We do something similar sometimes when we think how much stuff we have matters more than what those things mean. I'll give you an example of how that focus can distract us from what matters. I have two piles of blocks. They look about the same. If I give each pile to a person, does that seem fair? I think so. But let's count the blocks now. He has 8 but she has 10. Is that fair? Now it isn't quite so fair is it! When we care about counting exactly how many things we have, it makes it easier to compare what we have to other people, and feel upset if we have even one less thing. This Christmas, you will all get some gifts. But some of you will get many and some will get few. And it is very easy to compare and be upset if you have fewer or proud if you have more.

But that is not at all what Christmas is about! The thing that matters most is not how many gifts we have, or how much stuff we have. The thing that matters is if we have room for Jesus. We make room when we share love and kindness and do what is right. You can't put a number on those things.

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We are going to carry on with the theme of the census and things that can be counted and things that cannot. There's a lot more to it than just counting up our Christmas presents. It speaks to a whole attitude of attributing to ourselves the things that are actually from the Lord, and how destructive this attitude can be to our own happiness and wellbeing. Creating room for the Lord takes a willingness to let go of a certain degree of control and just trust in what the Lord has blessed us with.

To understand the spiritual meaning of the census that led Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem, we have to turn to the Old Testament. The Lord had given a promise to Abraham about the number of his descendants, a promise that was repeated multiple times:

I will surely treat you well, and make your descendants as the sand of the sea, which cannot be numbered for multitude. (Genesis 32:12)

Yet the number of the children of Israel  
Shall be as the sand of the sea,  
Which cannot be measured or numbered. (Hosea 1:10)

As the host of heaven cannot be numbered, nor the sand of the sea measured, so will I multiply the descendants of David My servant and the Levites who minister to Me. (Jeremiah 33:22)

Now we could say that this is of course hyperbole. What He really means is, "you will have a ton of descendants," not that they will be literally innumerable. I have here a bunch of sand. And I'm sure that no one would enjoy going through grain by grain counting how many grains of sands are here. But in theory it is possible. One could do that, given enough time and motivation. There is a set, finite, specific number of grains of sand in this pile.

But in the spiritual sense, something else is going on. Spiritually, there are things that are truly immeasurable because they are from the Lord, and so are from what is infinite and eternal. The Lord's love, for instance, is infinite; and it is not infinite because it is so large that we just cannot measure it; it is infinite because it is unlimited, infinitely and too eternity. We can get a glimpse of this in our own love, which likewise, if it is from the Lord, is immeasurable. Here's a simple question: how many children do you have? You can give me a number. How much love do you have for your children? You can't put a number on that, or a weight or a size or any meaningful restriction. How much more so does that apply to the Lord's love. It cannot and never can be exhausted, no matter how many billions of people it extends to, nor how many billions of years it persists. That is what is represented by the Children of Israel being said to be numberless: it represents that the truth and goodness from the Lord is infinite and eternal.

But then we come back to our story. The Christmas story does not speak of a numberless people, quite the opposite in fact: Caesar Augustus, the Roman emperor, sets out to number the people. Again, a fairly innocuous detail of the story. But if the numberless people of Israel represent the Lord's infinite provision of love and wisdom, goodness and truth, then what would it represent to try to put a limit on those people? To count them as a finite number? The Word itself indicates that this is a problem. There was a law that in a census, every person who was counted had to pay a ransom to the Lord lest they be punished with a plague; and when king David tried to count the people it brought a horrific curse on the people (Exodus 30:11-13; 2 Samuel 24:1-10). The reason is given in the Teaching of the New Church:

For by "the sons of Israel" are signified the truths and goods of the church, and by "numbering" is signified to set in order and dispose; and because it is

of the Lord alone to set in order and dispose the truths and goods of faith and of love with everyone in the church and in heaven, therefore when this is done by a man, as it was done by David through Joab, it then signifies the setting in order and disposing of such things by man, and not by the Lord, which is not to set in order and dispose, but to destroy. (*Secrets of Heaven* §10217)

Trying to count the people represents an attempt to control the Lord's goodness and truth as if they were one's own; as if we were their source and author, and could manufacture more and more until we were satisfied; as if the thing standing between us and happiness is that we have not received enough material things, or worse, that the Lord has simply improperly looked after us. It is the attitude that says we have to first provide exactly what we need for ourselves, apart from the Lord, before we can trust in what the Lord provides. It can be compared to a king who looks out at his subjects and basks in the vastness of his empire, or the rich man who counts up his money again and again and takes satisfaction in the mere possession of wealth. When we apply this attitude to spiritual things, we also ruin them. When we reflect on how much truth we know as a mark of wisdom or on our blessings as an indication of moral worth in comparison to others, we have actually lost sight of what is actually good and true.

Practically speaking we can see these dynamics at play in our lives. Think of a child counting the number of gifts in the pile before him, building up in his mind how impressive the number is, how many more he must have than another child, putting so much importance in the number rather than the quality, or more importantly, then in the love behind the giving of the gifts. The gifts have become a mere currency to measure his worth or happiness by. Hopefully we are past the childlike tendency of counting up our gifts to determine whether we should be boastful or upset. But we do the exact same thing in other ways. When you are annoyed with someone, have you ever tried to count up all your grievances against

them, in an attempt to justify your annoyance? People can view their salary, or the lifestyle they can afford, as a mark of either shame or pride. There are countless ways we keep score. Even with good things, as soon as we start to put a number on them we diminish them: when the Lord calls good things “numberless” is not just the amount, but the quality of good things. It is not just that they are endless, it is that they are the things that cannot be counted because having the quality of being countable is in itself a diminishment of what they are and the role they play in our lives. As soon as we see spiritual things this way, we tend to want more, and more, and to never be satisfied with what we have. We may compare our meagre blessings to the abundance that others have.

The Lord’s birth is the antidote. Although a focus on how much we have crowds out the Lord and leaves no room for Him, still He can be born. As the story relates, although Augustus’ census had disrupted and complicated Mary and Joseph’s living conditions, it did not prevent the birth itself:

And she brought forth her firstborn Son, and wrapped Him in swaddling cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2:4-7)

Born as a child, the Lord’s life began in complete and utter innocence. That innocence would remain the foundation and starting point for everything else that He would do or become. And it is in innocence that the Lord can begin His work in us.

True innocence is complete trust in the Lord, and a willingness to be led by Him rather than by ourselves.

Saying that the Lord’s blessings are countless does not mean that there are just a lot of them. You don’t arrive at infinity by adding many individual things together. The infinity of the Lord’s blessings speaks to their very nature, to their state

or quality. They are infinite and eternal. Not just taken collectively, but individually. Anything that is of the Lord is infinite and eternal. When we are blessed in some small way, the ramifications ripple outwards throughout our lives here on earth and onward to eternity. We do not need to grasp for more than what we have been blessed with, or doubt that it will run out.

Therefore I say to you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink; nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air, for they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns; yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? Which of you by worrying can add one cubit to his stature?

So why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; and yet I say to you that even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these. Now if God so clothes the grass of the field, which today is, and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will He not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?

Therefore do not worry, saying, "What shall we eat?" or "What shall we drink?" or "What shall we wear?" For after all these things the Gentiles seek. For your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about its own things. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble. (Matthew 6:25-34)