

Going by the Book

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

7 June 2026

Children's Talk: Learning to Love

The Children of Israel were given clear instruction about how to follow the Lord. These instructions were all together called "the Law of Moses." These weren't laws like traffic laws or that the police enforce. These were laws about how they need to worship the Lord and treat other people well. Joshua told them three things about the Law:

Only be strong and very courageous, that you may observe to do according to all the law which Moses My servant commanded you; do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may prosper wherever you go.

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it.

For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and of good courage; do not be afraid, nor be dismayed, for Jehovah your God is with you wherever you go." (Joshua 1:7-9)

The three things that Joshua told them were they had to obey the law; they had to study the book of the law; and that that is what would make them successful.

That middle part is the part I want to focus on: they would only be successful in obeying the law if they studied it. They needed to learn what the laws were.

Why do people need to go to school? Other people can know all the information. But the point is so that *you* can learn the information, because then *you* can use it.

Why do you need to learn math in school? A calculator can do math for you. But if you learn math, you will know how to use math in ways that a calculator can't.

Why do you need to learn how to spell in school? A dictionary can tell you how to spell. But if you learn how to spell you will be able to write for yourself in a way that a dictionary can't.

That's why the Lord says we have to study the law. Ministers and other people can know everything in the Word and tell you what it says. But the Lord wants

each one of us to learn it so that we can use it to become better people. That's why we have the Word in the first place: to become better people. When you are young you need a lot of help, just like you do with math and writing and other subjects. But by learning these things now when you are young, you will be able to use them to be a better person when you grow up.

Going by the Book

A sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn
7 June 2026

What place does education have in spiritual life? Spiritual life is above all about love; as Jesus taught all the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments:

You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like it: You shall love your neighbour as yourself. (Matthew 22:37-39)

Both great commandments are all about love. The Teachings of the New Church confirm this and emphasize that “to love” means to do loving and good things, stating that,

All religion is of life, and the life of religion is to do what is good. (*The Doctrine of Life* §1)

The whole point of all religion is, or at least ought to be, that you live a more loving and good life. That’s what it’s all about.

If that’s the case though, why not just focus on “be a good person”? The Lord didn’t stop at the Two Great Commandments, or even the whole of the Ten Commandments; He gave us a lengthy convoluted book full of stories and teachings. In the New Church we have thirty-some further volumes of teachings from the Lord. A core part of every Sunday service is the sermon, in which we spend time studying and reflecting on the Lord’s Word together. Why is there this emphasis on needing to study and learn things? We are not born knowing *how* to love other people. In order to love well we have to be instructed by the Lord. When Jesus taught His disciples, He compared their learning to a man who had amassed a treasure that he could now distribute freely:

Jesus said to them, “Have you understood all these things?”
They said to Him, “Yes, Lord.”

Then He said to them, “Therefore every scribe instructed concerning the kingdom of heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things new and old.” (Matthew 13:51-52)

The more we learn spiritually, the better able we are to serve others out of our storehouse of wisdom and awareness. When that wisdom is lacking, the love and the goodness will also be lacking and we will have little to offer others.

A great analogy to this is often seen on TV shows like American Idol. There are lots of people who absolutely love the idea of being a great singer. And they have passionately thrown themselves into singing and performing, at times with great confidence. Yet they have not properly studied or developed the skill of singing. And it shows, unfortunately. Something akin to this also shows up in a young person who is passionate about a certain kind of work say being a doctor. They care so much they may feel entitled to be given a high-level job, even if they are not yet skilled enough. Their passion cannot compensate for a lack of ability. They need to do the hard work of learning and honing their skill if they want to work at a higher level in the medical field.

The same is true of us spiritually. A man might love his family deeply and so throw himself into his work to provide for them; and then be hurt and confused when they resent him for never being around. A sibling may be so committed to loving a brother or a sister that he when they have caused great pain, but then have no idea what to do when, instead taking advantage of a second chance, they hurt them again. A person can get excited about some use in the community and try to rally people to it but find that instead of excitement they are rebuffed for asking too much of people or interfering with things they don't understand. The point of life is to love and to do good things; but we cannot do that if we have never studied or learned

how to. That is why ongoing, lifelong spiritual education is crucial for us. Between loving and doing we need to have learning.

There's a reason I used a book as the middle image representing "learn how." Books are containers and sources of the information and instructions that enable us to do what we need to do. Virtually every piece of furniture, appliance, or device will come with a little booklet telling you how to set it up and how to use it. Books hold information, information that can improve our knowledge, and from that knowledge we learn how to do things better. But of course books are more than just manuals. The value of many books lies not in the fact that they convey new information but that they tell a story, spark imagination, share experiences, move our hearts, and invite us to reflect on ourselves and other people. Those are some of the profound reactions that we can have to books, to the raw concepts that have been written down and consigned to the page (or screen) as we engage or reengage with those ideas.

We encounter spiritual education most fully in and from a book, specifically the Lord's Word. That is why He says,

This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate in it day and night, that you may observe to do according to all that is written in it. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success. (Joshua 1:8)

If we want to have spiritual success, in other words, to be as loving as possible, we will need the guidance of the Lord's Word. The Lord gave us a book so that we could, through studying and meditating on it, become people who can love more fully, deeply, and more usefully.

In the pews in front of you, you'll see copies of the Bible. I invite you to pick one up if there is one and just hold it for a moment. You are holding a revelation from the Lord. You get to go to it directly, unfiltered by anyone else's opinions or agendas.

You don't have to take my, or anyone else's, word for any question you may have or challenge you may be experiencing. Now I invite you to look around the room: every copy of the Bible in this room is the same Bible. It does not change based on who is holding it. We all go to the same one. And yet each and every one of us will take something different away from it. We'll interpret it differently, in ways that are diverse and even contradictory. And that's a good thing! The fact that the Lord has given us this touchstone is what allows us all to come together and be united in spite of, and at times even because of, our radically different understandings.

Now in the New Church we have more than just the Word: we have a whole series of deeply theological books. We refer to them as the teachings or writings of the New Church, and they offer a deeper understanding of the Lord's Word. We can often feel daunted by the complex style of these Writings, but at heart their purpose is no different from that of the Word: to teach people how to love better. If at times they may feel very abstract, or complicated, or academic, it is because life can be abstract, complicated, and academic. Life is not simple, and doing what is right is not always easy or clear. Sometimes it takes a very complex understanding of a concept in order for us to be able to apply it.

- How can there be only one God, when God seems so different to so many people in so many different contexts?
- How can salvation require good works, and yet not be a thing that can be earned by good works?
- How can the Word be both so messy and violent, and yet at the same time reflect the Lord in every detail?
- How can the Lord be the only path to salvation, when clearly there are so many good, heaven-bound people outside of the Christian faith?

- How can a marriage, contracted between two limited, ignorant people become a commitment that lasts to eternity?

These are just a few of the examples of concepts that we could study for years and yet still not fully grasp. There will always be more to learn, and the more we do learn, the more we can improve our relationship with the Lord and better live His teachings in relation to other people.

The way, as individuals and as a community, we can get the most out of our study of the Word is not by everyone becoming a scholar or an academic expert in the Word. What matters far more is our intentions, in other words, the motivation that prompts us to engage with the Lord's Word. The Teachings of the New Church explain that with the right attitude, anyone can learn from the Word, even if he or she doesn't feel like they have learned much when engaging with it:

Anyone who reads the Word with the intention of being wise, that is, of doing good and understanding truth, gains instruction according to his intention and affection. In fact without his knowing it the Lord flows in and enlightens the mind, and when he cannot grasp what is said in one place in the Word the Lord imparts to him understanding from others (*Secrets of Heaven* §3436)

Reading and learning from the Lord, in pursuit of becoming wiser, and so more loving, people, is what will enable you to get the most out of it. Even if you don't fully understand what you are reading (and none of us fully will!), the experience of listening to the Lord from a loving heart and for the sake of being a better person, will shape you and help you grow.

At the end of the day, the wisdom that is contained in the Word and in the Teachings of the New Church is a blessing and a privilege. It is not a burden that we have to push through. We get to learn more from the Lord Himself for the rest of our lives, and the result is that we have an opportunity for more fulfilling relationships and greater happiness.

Then He turned to His disciples and said privately, "Blessed are the eyes which see the things you see; for I tell you that many prophets and kings have desired to see what you see, and have not seen it, and to hear what you hear, and have not heard it." (Luke 10:23-24)