

Orientated towards the Lord

A Sermon by Rev. Joel Christian Glenn

5 July 2026

Children's Talk:

Who here has something they are very good at? Maybe better than lots of other people? I'm very good at math; and it's something I enjoy a lot. Who has something they are bad at? Maybe worse than lots of other people? I'm not very good at sports, I have a very hard time knowing where the ball is in a game and how to move my body to make it do what I want. What does it feel like to be really good at something? What does it feel like to be really bad at something?

The Lord told a story about people who thought that they were much better than everyone else, and deserved to be rewarded, even though they had done bad things. But the Lord said they would be in for a surprise:

But He will say, "I tell you I do not know you, where you are from. Depart from Me, all you workers of iniquity." There will be weeping and gnashing of teeth, when you see Abraham and Isaac and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God, and yourselves thrust out. They will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God. And indeed there are last who will be first, and there are first who will be last. (Luke 13:27-30)

The people who thought they were the best wouldn't make it into the kingdom of God. But lots and lots of other people would: those from the east and the west, from the north and the south. That means people from all over.

But it also means specific kinds of people: the people who are the most absolutely loving people make it in; as do those who are just basically nice and kind. The most wise people who know exactly what the Lord says and know exactly how to do the right thing make it; as do those who only know a little bit about the Lord and try their best. From east to west and north to south, from the most loving to the least, from the wisest to the one who knows the least, they all make it in.

We can learn two things from this: first, if we are doing many good things and know a lot about the Lord we shouldn't think we are special or better than other

people. We all are being led by the Lord. On the other hand, if other people seem to do so many more good things than you and know so much more about the Lord, we shouldn't feel bad: we too, even if we just try our best to be good and learn from the Lord, are in His kingdom. The person who is least in that way, is also the greatest.

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I want you to start today by picturing two armies facing off against each other. Both armies are equally equipped and equally numbered. One army though has lined up in disciplined ranks. Every soldier is in his place; every captain is directing his men intentionally where they are needed; the commander is ordering the army into position for the ideal attack. The other army on the other hand is simply a mass of people. There are no lines or positions, no directions from leaders, no way to intentionally position itself for the battle. Which army will win? Even though they are equally matched, it seems obvious that the army that is better organized will have a distinct advantage. The same is true of spiritual things. The more ordered goodness and truth are within us the stronger they become. Today we will explore a broad view of how to prioritize different spiritual things, and next week we will look more in depth at how some of the pieces work together.

When the Children of Israel were encamped in the wilderness they were given clear instructions on how to organize themselves as they camped and as they set out for their next destination:

And Jehovah spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying: "Everyone of the children of Israel shall camp by his own standard, beside the emblems of his father's house; they shall camp some distance from the tabernacle of meeting."
(Number 2:1-2)

Thus the children of Israel did according to all that Jehovah commanded Moses; so they camped by their standards and so they broke camp, each one by his family, according to their fathers' houses. (Numbers 2:34)

The rest of the chapter contains a detailed plan for how they should lay out the camp around the Tabernacle. I'll just read one section to give you a feel for it:

On the east side, toward the rising of the sun, those of the standard of the forces with Judah shall camp according to their armies; and Nahshon the son

of Amminadab shall be the leader of the children of Judah. And his army was numbered at seventy-four thousand six hundred.

Those who camp next to him shall be the tribe of Issachar, and Nethanel the son of Zuar shall be the leader of the children of Issachar. And his army was numbered at fifty-four thousand four hundred.

Then comes the tribe of Zebulun, and Eliab the son of Helon shall be the leader of the children of Zebulun. And his army was numbered at fifty-seven thousand four hundred. All who were numbered according to their armies of the forces with Judah, one hundred and eighty-six thousand four hundred—these shall break camp first.

The other eight tribes are given similar instructions for the south, west, and north, along with who the leader is and the number of men in the army. Why are these instructions in the Lord's Word? Why are they worth talking about today? As a matter of history they may seem irrelevant.

But when we understand them the spiritual sense, they become a guide for how we organize and structure our lives around the Lord. This arranging is crucial for our spiritual wellbeing and our ability to endure temptations and resist the influences of hell. The twelve tribes stand for all the goodness and truth that comes from the Lord; and the arrangement of the tribes stands for how the Lord arranges these good and true things:

An "army" signifies truths and goods (n. 3448), and truths and goods are arranged by the Lord into heavenly order; hence an "encamping" denotes an arranging by armies; and the heavenly order itself which is heaven, is the "camp." This "camp" or order is of such a nature that hell cannot possibly break in upon it, although it is in the constant endeavour to do so. Hence also this order, or heaven, is called a "camp," and the truths and goods (that is, the angels) who are arranged in this order, are called "armies." (*Secrets of Heaven* §4326)

The armies of Israel stand for goodness and truth; but the strength of goodness and truth, and the way that it can defend against hell, that is, against evil and falsity, only comes when those goods and truths are arranged properly into a heavenly order, as represented by the arrangement of the tribes of Israel around the Tabernacle. Just

as a disorganized army will lose to an organized one, disorganized goodness and truth will fail us when we need it most.

That organization is not as simple as “just make sure the Lord is at the centre.” If we leave it there, a lot is still out of place. The Children of Israel did not just camp at random with the Tabernacle in the middle. Every tribe and family had its own place where it fit into the greater whole. The point of spiritual life is not just to have a general leaning towards the Lord and then let everything else fall as it may. The goal is to have everything organized and orientated such that it all fits together meaningfully. Take a random collection of loves and truths: love for your spouse, you should go to church, you should serve other people, and love for your work. With no structure, these will bump up against each other and clash: at times a less important love will overrule a more important one, a less true idea will outweigh a more true one. Loving your spouse is good; loving your work is good; but which do you choose when you can't do both at the same time? Faithfully attending worship is the right thing to do; serving your neighbour is also the right thing to do; but which takes precedence when they conflict? When they are out of place, good and true things can become avenues for selfish behaviour or other kinds of harm. So just like an army preparing for battle must be organized, we have to give thought to the organizing principles that will strengthen the good and true things we know and value and ensure they are put to the right use.

So let's go back now and look at how the tribes were arranged around the Tabernacle and think how that will help us get into a heavenly order. The Tabernacle was the centre of the camp, representing how the Lord ought to be the centre and focus. After that the broadest organizing principle was by directions: east, south, west, and north, listed in that order. The tribes to the east led when they travelled,

followed by those to the south, then those to the west, with those in the north bringing up the rear. Every time these directions appear in the Word they have a broad spiritual meaning, clearly indicating all people, from the greatest to the least, from the furthest reaches of the Earth:

I will bring in your seed from the sunrise and bring you together from the west; I will say to the north, Give up, and to the south, Hold not back; bring in My sons from far, and My daughters from the end of the earth. (Isaiah 43:5-6).

They will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south, and sit down in the kingdom of God. And indeed there are last who will be first, and there are first who will be last. (Luke 13:28)

But although they generally stand for all, they also contain a more specific meaning, of all the good and truth of the church, and of all the kinds of people who belong in the Church, from the most loving to the least loving, from the wisest to the simplest. This is where the directions become helpful for how we organize things spiritually.

The east, where the sun rises, stands for the Lord Himself, and so also love to Him, and the love from Him that extends to all people. This is why the Lord is called the dayspring from on high (Luke 1:78), the Sun of Righteousness that shall arise with healing in His wings (Malachi 4:2). In Hebrew one of the words for the east also means “in front,” as we are to have the Lord, and love, as front and centre at all times. That is the guiding goal and purpose of spiritual life. This teaches us that if nothing else you are *loving* towards others, that’s a successful and good day; regardless of what else you do or do not get done. We can get at this by asking ourselves on any given day, “what is the most loving thing to do?” That question is more important than asking what is most efficient, beneficial, successful, or right to be doing.

The south, where the light is strongest through the day (bearing in mind that the land of Israel is in the northern hemisphere), stands for wisdom and truth from

the Lord, that shows us the way we ought to live. The Hebrew word for south means “on the right hand,” in pride of place, where the most important person would sit in relation to the king, such as we use it even now when we talk of a “right-hand man.” Truth is the “right-hand man,” as it were, of love: it exists to enable love to be seen and known and lived. Living according to the truth is what makes love real. This takes us to the next priority after being loving: trying to do the *right* thing, to resist some selfish impulse, each day, even if you are mostly unsure of how to navigate life, work, family, and so on. One way to check ourselves against this is to ask, “am I breaking any of the Lord’s rules?” This is especially true of the Ten Commandments, particularly the ones relating to moral behaviour: “am I in any sense murdering (attacking another person), bearing false witness, stealing, or committing adultery?”

The west, which is opposite the east, and where the sun sets, stands for love and goodness that are lesser, or that are only felt obscurely. The word for “west” here literally means “the sea,” meaning the Mediterranean Sea lying to the west of Israel. The sea stands for things that are colder, murkier, darker than what is represented by the east. There are many things that we like and care about that are not the most important things in life. And yet, they still are a part of our spiritual wellbeing. Enjoying yourself for the sake of enjoying yourself is a perfectly acceptable spiritual practice! The Lord wants life to be fun and happy for us. As long as they don’t distract from the deeper, more important loves, they can be very good, and even useful. As long as we have prioritized being loving and doing what is right in the things that matter, there are many other decisions we can make in life by just asking, “what would I enjoy the most?” There doesn’t always have to be a “right” or “correct” choice. We don’t need an excuse to justify doing what we want.

The north, opposite to the south, is where there is less sunlight (again, considered from the northern hemisphere), and the Hebrew word for north means hidden or dark. The north stands for truth that is lesser or that is only seen obscurely, mere knowledge and information rather than clearly understood wisdom of life. You could say that they are things that are true that are not spiritually important. Don't get attached to things that are technically true but that don't lead to spiritual good. There are many ways that we can be correct without being in the right. This also applies to things that are spiritually true but that we don't yet understand. We all know things that we don't quite understand how to apply practically or usefully in this moment. These ideas can again be very good and we should spend time learning and studying them; but not to the detriment of the truths that we can apply and do lead to goodness. To check us against this we might ask, "am I letting an obsession with being right get in the way of more important things?"

In sum we then have an arrangement that looks like this:

1. East = Love to the Lord and charity towards the neighbour. If all you do today is try your best to let genuine spiritual love take the lead, that's a successful and worthwhile day.
2. South = Truth from goodness and faith from charity. If all you do beyond that is make sure you keep the most basic, central truths and refrain from doing evil to your neighbour, that's a successful and worthwhile day.
3. West = Obscure or lesser love and goodness. Within those parameters, follow what you enjoy, take delight in the things that delight you, make choices that make you happy or that will make someone else happy.
4. North = Obscure or lesser truth or knowledge. Within those parameters, do try to learn more and figure out how to do things a little better, without letting an

obsession with getting everything right stand in the way of being loving and useful.

By ordering love and wisdom in this way, we align ourselves with the order of heaven and bring our lives into line with the life of heaven. Next week we will go deeper into details about the twelve tribes and their arrangement, and how that can give us even more guidance on bringing our lives into heavenly order.