

Governing Principles in Our Lives

A sermon by the Rev. Michael Gladish
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About a month ago we had a sermon on what we call “ruling loves,” that is, the loves in ourselves that dominate over all other loves or, in today’s jargon, take priority. Now, today, we are considering what we might call “ruling truths,” or more familiarly, governing principles, that is, the concepts or ideas that predominate over others in our minds and take priority. Just as certain loves in us take the lead in determining what we want, certain concepts or ideas take the lead in determining how we understand and react to a situation.

For example, if we start with the principle that the Lord loves us, and we really believe that, then any other thoughts that come into our minds tend to be seen in that light and qualified by that *governing principle*. So as difficult as something may be for us, we will have a tendency to look for the good in it, and try to see the Lord’s wisdom in permitting it. On the other hand, if we start from the assumption that He *doesn’t* love us we will have a tendency to view everything that happens to us as a punishment, or at best another arbitrary event in a relatively hostile world.

Again, if we start with the principle that human life continues after the death of the body, and that heaven and hell are real, we will interpret the events of this world in that context, and will tend to make judgments and decisions with a view to eternal life. But if we assume that this natural life is all there is, well, that changes everything.

The point is that there ARE governing principles in our lives, and other concepts or ideas tend to be subordinate to these. The Lord Himself spoke about this when He quoted the Two Great Commandments, saying, “On these two commandments hang all the Law and the Prophets” (Matt. 22:40). In other words, there are two overriding principles here, love to the Lord and love toward the neighbor, and all the other commandments, laws, statutes and judgments fall into order behind them. And yes, though the reference here is to loves, the point is still a truth, and this is a matter of principle – that we *should* love.

This brings to mind the well-known passage in the Arcana #2568:4, where we read,

“There are ... two principles; one of which leads to all folly and insanity, and the other to all intelligence and wisdom. The former principle is to deny all things, or to say in the heart that we cannot believe them until we are convinced by what we can apprehend, or perceive by the senses; this is the principle that leads to all folly and insanity, and is to be called the negative principle. The other principle is to affirm the things which are of doctrine from the Word, or to think and believe within ourselves that they are true because the Lord has said them: this is the principle that leads to all intelligence and wisdom, and is to be called the affirmative principle.”

You heard more about this in our third lesson today (including AC 2588) where things of reason, philosophy, memory and even the physical senses are cited as confirming or supporting one or the other of the two primary assumptions. Several pages of examples are there given to illustrate the concept, one key implication being that you can never convince anybody about the truths of faith if they are stuck in the negative principle.

And so we have our lesson about Jethro's advice. His urging Moses to *delegate* some of his judicial responsibilities to others illustrates the point about the hierarchy of principles that govern our lives. Moses, representing the Divine Law, is still the chief judge, but in taking Jethro's advice he appoints subordinate judges to help him resolve conflicts among the people: "rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens" (Gen. 18:21). In the literal sense alone it's a great management policy, since it spreads responsibility around, not only making lighter work for the person in charge but giving many others a sense of usefulness and responsibility, too. Still, it's in the spiritual sense where we see the universal application.

Here, again, the concept is one of ruling and subordinate concepts, and it's at least interesting that these rulers are called "princes" in the old translations of the Arcana (e.g. #8712-15). So the teaching is that there is a sort of cascading series of concepts that flow from the most important down to the least important, informing everything we do.

To take another example, we know that it's important to go to church. Why? - Because we learn important things in church, and, as one passage (AC 1618) says, we have states of holiness conferred upon us by the Lord (whether we aware of it or not). And there are other reasons. But we also know that it's even more important to believe in the Lord and live daily according to His Word. Church attendance *supports* this higher principle, but it does not have an equal claim on our responsibility. One must be judged in light of the other. Further complicating the issue, we also know that hypocrisy in worship is a very bad thing, and sometimes we must face the fact that we're not in a very good state and we just don't feel like going to church. But there are many other considerations that apply in this case, such as the principle of self-compulsion (which is NOT hypocrisy), the principle of support for others at the service, and the principle of setting an example for the children.

Now the Lord laid out some pretty important protocols about worship. He said, for example,

“...if you bring your gift to the altar, and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar, and go your way. First be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Matt. 5:23-24).

But notice that He didn't say, “Don't offer your gift,” He said “First be reconciled... and THEN offer your gift.” However since we all have issues, past or present, with other people if we take this literally as our ruling principle about worship we might have empty churches every Sunday – including empty pulpits! Remember, the Lord purposefully went to eat with tax collectors and sinners, and when He was challenged about that He said, “I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance” (Matt. 9:13). One of the things we can do in church is repent, and then the gift that we will offer the Lord is a better life.

To take a different kind of example, we know that it's important to give generously to the needy, but an even higher priority is to give in such a way that it benefits people's spiritual lives, not just their natural lives, in other words, to give in such a way that it does not enable lazy, foolish or disorderly behavior but allows them to get on their feet and be useful. If the former is done without consideration for the latter we may just contribute to the perpetuation of a problem.

In this context the Heavenly Doctrines lay out a clear formula for evaluating all sorts of uses. Since the Lord Himself, or good from the Lord, is the neighbor we should serve in the highest degree, it follows that those in heaven, who live according to His Word, are our neighbors in the next highest sense. Then comes the church, both as an institution and as to its members, since the church teaches and leads us toward heaven. Below that is the country in which we live (and all the people in it), since these provide us with the natural and civil means to live well, including the rule of law and military forces to defend us from harm. And finally we get down to communities, family units and individual people (see NJHD 88-96). So if we face a choice between helping an individual and helping a whole family we know what to do. And if we face a choice between helping our own family and helping our nation, again, we know what to do – for the simple reason that the nation involves many millions of people! And finally, if we face a choice between helping the country naturally and helping it spiritually, again, we know what to do.

Of course the uses often overlap, and it's not always easy to tell *how* to do what's best – which is one reason the church itself does not endorse any particular charities. But every one of us has an obligation to think through these priorities and make decisions based on his or her best light.

So, getting back to Jethro's advice, what do the rulers of thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens represent in our spiritual lives?

Well, a *thousand* actually represents an unlimited number, so the rulers of thousands are the principles that govern our lives in the broadest possible sense, the truths that apply most generally, like the Two Great Commandments. A *hundred* in the Word represents a state that is full or complete but in a lesser degree than the thousand, so the rulers of hundreds are the principles that govern in less universal applications, such as the life of the church specifically, as distinct from our lives at work, or in the military, or in politics.

What's the difference? Well, even though the Two Great Commandments still rule overall, these specific situations involve their own principles and protocols such as we find in boards and committees, ranks of authority, confidentiality or the stipulations of a constitution. As long as these do not conflict with the Divine laws they must also be considered as a matter of order.

Jumping – for the moment – to the meaning of *ten*, we find in the heavenly doctrines that this is the basic unit representing fullness, specifically the fullness of remains, that is, all the goods and truths that the Lord stores up in our interiors where they *remain* no matter what destructive forces act against us. So the rulers of tens are especially the truths that govern our INNER lives, our attitudes and personal judgments whether they involve anyone else or not.

Finally, *fifty* is an interesting number mainly because it's half of a hundred, and five time ten. Five itself is a number that represents *some, somewhat, or a little*, we might say a handful. So the rulers of fifty are intermediate principles that govern our lives in personal relationships – not just our own lives but not necessarily our corporate lives, either. These are the rules of common courtesy and personal concern for those with whom we interact on a daily basis. Again, the great commandments apply overall, and the rules of corporate life apply more specifically, but we will make even more specific judgments in our relations with individuals based on what we know about them, their needs, their limitations and their strengths. This particular category of judgment extends what we determine inwardly to a relatively limited sphere of our influence.

Now it may seem from all this that our lives must involve an endlessly complicated series of critical decisions, running the gauntlet from self-examination to layer upon layer of judgments about everything we do. *But in reality it's all very simple.* We just have to shun evils and play by the rules. It's only when specific questions arise at any given level that we need to go, as it were, to the court of appropriate appeals, consider the special circumstance, and then get on with it.

Too much introspection isn't good; neither is a lot of reasoning. The point of having greater and lesser principles is not to make life more complicated but to make it easier. How long would it take, for instance, to consider the global implications of everything we do? Like the average Israelite waiting in line for Moses, how long would we have to wait to get what we might call actionable clarity? Instead we can take the little things to a lower court, representatively speaking, get a quick decision and move on, saving the big questions for the occasional times – once or twice or three times a year, as at the holy supper – when we reflect more deeply and consider more fully the spiritual significance of our choices.

Just as Moses was the Lord's appointed leader overall during the exodus, the highest principles of the Lord's law have been appointed to lead and govern overall in our lives. But there's no need to make a big deal out of every small matter. The Lord always works through appropriate means, and the means in this case are the simpler, more particular principles that apply in specific cases. Let us apply these wisely and accept the consequences willingly, without doubt or second-guessing, or unnecessary hesitation.

Amen.

Lessons: *Exodus* 18: selections
 Children's Talk on Priorities: How to Make Good Choices

John 6:25-35
Arcana Caelestia #2568 & 2588: selections