

# MARY AND THE 144,000<sup>1</sup>

By Paul Penno Jr.

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“And Jesus answering said unto him, Simon, I have somewhat to say unto thee. And he saith, Master, say on. There was a certain creditor which had two debtors: the one owed five hundred pence, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing to pay, he frankly forgave them both. Tell me therefore, which of them will *love* him *most*?” (Luke 7:40-42).

If we realize that our worldly hearts are cold, if no tears of gratitude ever well up in our eyes, should we go out and give ourselves to the devil and repeat Mary’s plunge so we can learn how to “love much”? No, for we might never find our way back as she did. But there’s a better way to learn how to “love much.”

(a) Realize, (b) see, (c) behold, (d) grasp, how your true guilt is greater than you have imagined it to be. See—how you sit side by side with Simon owing “five hundred silver coins,” not a mere fifty. *Think about what you would be* if Jesus had not already “saved” you from your true potential.

If you had grown up watching documentaries on Nazism; if you had been a German child growing up under Hitler, surrounded with that insistent propaganda, taught to obey orders whether or not, faithful in a patriotic way, what could you have

become? When you were born, you had no built-in defense that would have made you more righteous!

The New English Bible correctly renders our familiar text that may leave us feeling a little smug and self-satisfied. Romans 3:23 usually tells us that we have sinned, well, some: “All have sinned . . .” But the true rendering is: “All *alike* have sinned.” No one of us as humans is innately any more righteous than anyone else.

We all have inherited through our genes and chromosomes the same sinful, fallen nature. We were *born* separated from God and thus alienated from righteousness. We were born on our own; we have all had to *learn* about a Savior. We have had to *hear* the gospel—it didn’t come as standard equipment in our genes. If we *never hear* it, no telling where we could end up.

Whatever “goodness” we may imagine we possess has been the imputed and imparted gift of Christ’s righteousness. If He were to let go of us, we would be helpless, which means we would be powerless to save ourselves from the evil that our sinful nature would prompt us to do and to be.

The sins of someone else therefore would be our sins aside from that grace of Christ. They *are* our sins . . . but for Him! The message of Christ’s righteousness makes clear that it is His 100%, not ours by even one percent. But our worldly hearts resent this humbling realization. The Jews in Christ’s day resented it; we are as prone today. In honest truth, we are sitting with Simon the Leper.

**We owe the full five hundred silver coins.**

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<sup>1</sup> Romans 3:23-25. “Love Divine;” “Jesus Keep Me Near the Cross”

Our host, Simon, the former leper, has been a silent witness to Mary's act of devotion. He seems not to be concerned with its extravagance as are the Twelve. Darker surmisings even than those are coursing through his soul, honest and practical as he may be.

He has not yet believed that Jesus is the Savior, though he has hoped that He might indeed prove Himself to be the Messiah. Having experienced the thrill of a miraculous healing from leprosy, he has condescended now to invite the Galilean and His poor followers to this social occasion so he can express his gratitude. In so doing, he avoids giving Jesus the honor of recognition as a social equal.

Watching the sublime spectacle of a repentant sinner wiping the tearstained feet of the world's Savior with her hair, Simon reasons darkly within himself, "This Man, if He were a prophet, would know who and what manner of woman this is who is touching Him: for she is a sinner" (Luke 7:39). How little does the self-righteous heart discern the credentials of heaven!

In the parable He used to enlighten poor Simon, Jesus reveals the lesson of the cross that enlightens every honest heart that will pause to survey it: *you love in proportion as you sense you have been forgiven.*

You're only a small sinner? Okay, you are doomed therefore to love little.

Simon having been the instrument in leading Mary into sin originally was clearly the debtor owing five hundred silver coins. By contrasting Simon's cold-hearted lovelessness with the warm devotion of

Mary, Jesus tactfully revealed to his darkened mind the truly astounding realization: Mary's repentant love should have been his *if the one forgiven most should love most.*

The light even now shining from the cross illumined Simon's heart and disclosed to him the almost hopeless sinner that he was. The infinite pity of Jesus saved him from an ultimate ruin greater than Mary's would have been. Simon could have also sung Wesley's hymn, "Jesus, Lover of My Soul," as Mary could.

#### **Beware of Misunderstanding**

The parable of Jesus was not intended to show that different degrees of obligation should be felt by us different sinners. Both Simon and Mary were infinitely and eternally in debt to the divine Creditor. Mary's love however was due to the simple fact that she *knew* she was a sinner and had been forgiven *much*. Simon had been forgiven little because he *felt* he had sinned but little.

Can anyone in God's eternal kingdom go about feeling superior to others? "I never was like the common run of people! I came from a good family and grew up on the right side of the tracks! My friends weren't the ordinary drop-outs, living loose, or using drugs. I was pretty good on my own, and all I needed was a slight push to get me over the top into the kingdom!"

Wouldn't such words seem more appropriate coming from some whiner outside the City gates than from someone inside?

If Paul could call himself "the chief of sinners," can we do less? What light the cross may shed upon

the unfeeling heart of Laodicea, the last of the great seven churches of history! Lukewarm, self-righteous saints will trail behind the publicans and harlots who, like Mary, will gladly repent when they hear the last message of mercy. “Many that are first shall be last; and the last first.”

This “formula” that Jesus expressed to Simon (“forgiven much, love much; forgiven little, love little”) if understood becomes a truth that will transform a lukewarmness (church) into one throbbing with the life of heaven.

Jesus realized that it would have been just as difficult for Simon to grasp this as it is for us in Laodicea to grasp it now. That’s why He knew that He had to come down hard on Simon with devastating logic, so he could see his true condition. The “formula” (“forgiven much/love much”) has been described as “systemic guilt” and “systemic repentance.” Systemic guilt is for sins we may not have personally committed, but which we know we *would* have committed if we had met a temptation of sufficient strength, and if we had not had a Savior holding us by the hand.

Someone has wisely said that “the books of heaven record the sins that would have been committed had there been opportunity.”<sup>2</sup> You may cry in distress, “There’s no end to my guilt! Then there’s no hope for me!” But there was hope for Mary—delivered from her seven devils; there was hope for Simon—from his eighth. And let us remember: if the dimensions of our true corporate

guilt are as wide as the whole world that crucified the Son of God, there is also the infinite righteousness of Christ that He longs to impute and impart to us. He forgave those who crucified Him—we are the ones who did it. We are forgiven!

There is no biblical hint that Jesus’ self-sacrificing labor for Simon’s soul was in vain; the Pharisee’s heart was touched. Undoubtedly, he became a converted follower of Jesus. Christ’s morning prayer that day was answered!

And before Jesus died, in Simon converted He saw a prophecy of Laodicea converted! Hang on by faith; there *is* hope for her. The church can be healed.

Mary seems displaced in history. Jesus praised her with His most enthusiastic endorsement (“she hath done what she could,” meaning, she has done *all she could*).

Now comes this strange group of people who also get the highest praise in history when it is said that they “follow the Lamb whithersoever He goeth. . . . In their mouth [is] found no guile: for they are *without fault*” (Rev. 14:4, 5). Pretty high resumes! Not duplicated in history.

Mary seems to have found closer fellowship with this strange group than she found among the Twelve. And it’s not until the end of time that we see this demonstration of the long-awaited “first-fruits unto God and to the Lamb” in the appearance of this mysterious group.

If Jesus also commended Mary so highly, it would seem that her entry into history should have been delayed until that special last-days group arrives.

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<sup>2</sup> Ellen G. White, *Signs of the Times*, July 31, 1901.

That's where she deserves fellowship, more than among the Twelve. But there's a reason why she came when she did, just before Jesus had to die.

This is how the last group are described: "After these things I saw four angels standing on the four corners of the earth, holding the four winds of the earth, that the wind should not blow on the earth. . . . And I saw another angel ascending from the east, having the seal of the living God: and he cried with a loud voice to the four angels, to whom it was given to hurt the earth and the sea, saying. Hurt not the earth . . . till we have sealed the servants of our God in their foreheads. And I heard the number of them which were sealed: . . . an hundred and forty and four thousand" (Rev. 7:1-4).

A few identifying features seem clear cut:

- They have the "Father's name written in their foreheads" (14:1). They are the same ones who have "the seal of the living God . . . in their foreheads" (7:1-4).

- They hold a pivotal place in *the end* of human history because their sealing coincides with four angels holding back the ultimate outbreak of human hatreds—a war never known before has been restrained. This seems to pinpoint when the "144,000" as a group come on the world's stage.

- Their being "without fault before the throne of God" inspires the most glorious outbreak of symphonic and choral music ever: "I heard the voice of harpers harping with their harps: and they sung as it were a new song before the throne, and before the four living creatures, and the elders: and no man could learn that song but the hundred and

forty and four thousand, which were redeemed from the earth" (14:2, 3). They celebrate a victory that Heaven has been waiting a long time to see.

- They must be the ones of whom Jesus speaks in His message to "the angel of the church of the Laodiceans," special because in a time when overcoming is ridiculed as "perfectionism" they quietly and bravely have "overcome . . . even as [Christ] also overcame" (3:21). That's a distinction reserved for the last of the seven churches. Mary Magdalene gave the world a glimpse of one person whose faith was a mirror reflection of the faith and *agape* of Jesus; now a multitude demonstrate the same.

- Mary came out of a horrific experience of possession by seven demons, and therefore the quality in her joy of deliverance must be very rare. These "144,000" have an experience that is also rare in world history. "These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb" (Rev. 7:14). Their "tribulation" may well be physical distress in bloody persecution, as we have usually thought; but that "great tribulation" may also be an excruciatingly severe battle with evil spirits.

- They know a life struggle that draws on one's soul to its depths. Jacob's famous "night of wrestling" was not one of mere physical torture; its mental agony and spiritual dimensions prefigure this final struggle of the "144,000." If no one else can sing their special song, it must mean that no previous *group* in history has ever known the severity of the spiritual battle these will have had.

- Mary's faith was said by Jesus to be unique in history up to that time. Not even Abraham, "the father of the faithful," merited such praise as Jesus gave her. So the "144,000" stand unique at the end of history, singing that new "song before the throne" which no other group is permitted to sing. None have had their unique experience.

- Apparently one has to emerge from a battle with "seven devils" in order to qualify! What generation in history has been confronted with ultimate allurements of Satan's most masterful temptations, other than this generation in which we live today? Only in an era of world terrorism could such a victorious faith meet the ultimate in temptation that would set it in special display.

- Because the "144,000" demonstrate "the firstfruits unto . . . the Lamb," there seems something almost incredulous that down until the very end of time Jesus has to wait and wait before He can see such "firstfruits" of His great sacrifice.

- What about all those glorious exploits of "by faith" described in Hebrews 11 and in the story of the reformers and martyrs of the past two millennia? Aren't their achievements sufficient for this honor? Must all this vast host step aside, cover their mouths and listen reverently while this special choir of "144,000" sing their piece by themselves? Apparently the answer has to be yes. There has to be a reason.

Whoever this strange group may be and whether their number is literal or symbolic, we dare not try to say. What we know for sure is that their appearance on the stage is the signal for the conclusion of the

longstanding "great controversy between Christ and Satan."

They make possible what Heaven has longed to see ever since the hour when on His cross before He died, Jesus foresaw that someday His sacrifice would bear such fruit. Before He can bow His head and die, He must know (as Psalm 22 says) that "the meek *shall* eat and be satisfied; they shall praise the Lord that seek Him: *your heart shall live for ever*. All the ends of the world shall remember and turn unto the Lord; and all the kindreds of the nations shall worship before Thee. For the kingdom is the Lord's; and He is the governor among the nations. . . . A seed *shall* serve Him; it shall be accounted to the Lord for a generation" (Ps. 22:26-31). That "seed" is the demonstration of faith that will light up the universe before the end of the great controversy between Christ and Satan. The angels yearn to see it.

Christ had won the stupendous cosmic victory, but now before He has to die He must be allowed to look beyond to see *by faith* its end results. It's not that He wanted to reap a grand reward for Himself; He was pouring out His soul unto death, the second death. Like someone choosing to go down on the *Titanic* and give his place on the lifeboat to us, He rejoiced because *our hearts* "shall live forever."

That "generation" that "serves Him" is what He has been waiting for. His ministry in the Most Holy Apartment of His heavenly sanctuary is what nerves them for the last trial. "The elect" must not be swept away by the final avalanche of the Enemy's barrage of deceptive temptation.

**The “144,000” have a special role in this last great drama.**

Each individual will demonstrate his unique personal victory in overcoming “even as [Christ] overcame.” Each one will have his own unique conflict. Apparently Satan will have 144,000 different kinds of temptation designed to appeal to every category of human experience. There are alcoholics, drug addicts, pornographers, sexual aberrants, people who have felt driven to the verge of the suicide cliff, lukewarm church adherents—all are people who have engaged in direct hand-to-hand duels with the Enemy of souls. Their very humanity as having been created “in the image of God” has withstood the Enemy’s effort to destroy it. They have felt a solemn kinship with Mary Magdalene in her spiritual dungeon of despair.

They all will know one common denominator of temptation, yes; but from every widespread divergent culture of the Orient, Africa, Eastern Europe, Malaysia, “they come from the east and west” each having a unique battle individual to themselves, each glorifying Christ in a unique, never-duplicated way.

Even from the depths of the Hollywood culture some must receive the grace to overcome! They too can glorify Christ in a unique way. Revelation guarantees that some even from the Roman curia of the Vatican will step out of their closet and bravely embrace the truth of the gospel when the fourth great angel makes his proclamation (see 18:1-4 and 15:2, 3).

**Mary, your brothers and sisters are coming!**

They have all had their battles with seven demons, as you have had your battle with them, and they have all overcome by faith *as you did*—you all sharing together a special fellowship with the Lamb who won His battle on His cross. All have come to appreciate that “breadth, and length, and depth, and height” of the infinite *agape* of Christ. They have at last grown up “unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ,” a corporate body of believers prepared to be a bride who “hath made herself ready” for “the marriage of the Lamb.” The bride’s garments are “the righteousness of saints,” the righteousness of Christ<sup>3</sup> imparted to them so that now it has become theirs by faith<sup>4</sup> (see Rev. 19:7, 8). It’s to Zion that they come. Isaiah describes this host flocking in during that last universal evangelistic campaign:

“Lift up thine eyes round about, and see: all they gather themselves together, they come to thee: thy sons shall come from far, shall come from far, and thy daughters shall be nursed at thy side. Then thou shalt see, and flow together, and thine heart shall fear, and be enlarged. . . . The sons of strangers shall build up thy walls, and their kings shall minister unto thee. . . . Therefore thy gates shall not be shut day nor night. . . . Thy people also shall all be righteous” (60:4-21, KJV).

These almost infinite temptations will target individuals from “every nation, and kindred, and tongue, and people” of the last days. To each one “the everlasting gospel” has become uniquely the

<sup>3</sup> *Dikaiosune*, Greek.

<sup>4</sup> *Dikaiomata*, Greek.

individual, personal “power of God unto salvation to every one that believeth.” Each is an important part of the whole. The great controversy cannot at last be declared a total success until every attack of the Enemy is vanquished. Someone exercising “the faith of Jesus” will demonstrate His power to save from every demonic captivity the world around— shall we say, 144,000 categories? You are important!

The humblest person in his lowly place will have his victory-laden trial that is the fraction of 144,000<sup>th</sup> of the whole. And there will be “kings” and “princes” too who must bear their part of the final burden. The entire phalanx of believers in their intimate relationship will together stand in their totality as the mirror reflection of the heart of the tempted but victorious Son of God on His cross. Mary has been the prototype, the miniature prophecy of what will be.

It’s popular to regard as impossible the prospect of an entire “church” growing spiritually to “overcome even as [Christ] overcame.” The idea is often dismissed as “perfectionism.” But those who fail to sense the non-egocentric nature of Christ’s definition of faith cannot grasp how good this Good News is. Both the world and it seems the church are given to self-seeking; even our “righteousness” is ego-oriented. Our definition of faith is egocentric. Our hymns are often permeated with self. Self is the sanctified concern. We seek a “balance” between concern for self and hopefully some concern for Christ, but now “balance” has become our popular

lukewarmness, partly hot, partly cold. Some love of the world, some love for Christ.

But to be lukewarm will become a thing of the past. It’s had its day. The quiet preacher of Bethany has forever outlawed it.

**Jesus rejoiced before He drew His last breath.**

His *agape* had performed its wonders in the one soul redeemed from Magdala. The test case was a success. Mary’s Christian experience gave to the Savior that prototype, the assurance He yearned for before He died. A faith that appreciated His *agape* sacrifice produced *one person* who reflected His character; *a people* from all over the world who can “stand without fault before the throne of God” will do the same. No wonder the crucified Jesus died with His face lighted with a blaze of glory.

The Lord in His great mercy has sent the most precious message to His people that will prepare them to “stand in the great day of God.” The message is to swell to a great loud cry that will awaken every human heart to make the final choice to receive or reject it.

Mary’s faith inspired by *agape* can teach us the new ways to reach hearts with the everlasting gospel. No committee could have thought up her novel way of proclaiming the message. So will every one in the Lord’s 144,000 categories of saints each make his or her own special contribution to that fourth angel’s blessed task of lighting the earth with the glory of the final message. Love will be their teacher.

The lady once possessed of seven devils thought she was useless; but she was important. So are you.