

# LOVE ALL LOVES EXCELLING

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ACTS 16:30, 31

“The Sound of Music” with Julie Andrews, plays this time of year. Some of the songs Julie sings are striking, “I Must Have Done Something Good,” the idea being—to deserve this precious gift of love that “we” have discovered, the two of us. What is this?

And then it hits you, this is pure Hinduism! This is the doctrine of *karma*: you do good things and get rewards; a teaching is being glorified here diametrically opposite to what Jesus taught. Nobody asked me to write the lyrics for “The Sound of Music,” but if I could, I would re-write that one: “I Must Have Believed Something True.” Hinduism is extremely popular, even sometimes in Christian churches—the idea that doing good works brings deserved blessings.

The people had asked Christ, “What shall we do, that we might work the works of God? Jesus answered and said unto them, This is the work of God, that ye believe on Him whom He hath sent” (Jn. 6:28, 29). And again He said, “God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on Him . . .” (3:16). Someone somewhere is bound to get upset at this idea (“aren’t good works and obedience important?!”). Yes, of course they are; but the problem is that you can’t do them unselfishly unless first of all you believe His Good News!

Millions of people watch “The Sound of Music,” dreaming of sweet human love they seem never to discover, feeling lonely and bereft. “Climb Every Mountain,” they are told, “Ford Every Stream”—that is, works may get you where you want to go.

To all, Jesus says: there’s a sweeter “sound of music” to listen to, the song sung by the “ten thousand times ten thousand and thousands of thousands,” “Worthy is the Lamb that was slain. . . . Blessing and honor, and glory and power be unto . . . the Lamb forever and ever” (Rev. 5:12, 13). There’s the “love all loves excelling,” as Charles Wesley said, and he was right! The lesser turns to ashes without the greater.

It was “at midnight” in a city called Philippi, in a jail. Two servants of God, of whom He had once said, “Touch not My anointed ones, and do My prophets no harm” (Psalm 105:15), had been rudely thrust into a prison cell by the city fathers who did not understand the message of God’s grace. Paul and Silas were proclaiming that good news. You might wonder why the Lord even permitted them to be locked up with chains when He has said “Don’t touch them!” The reason: He wanted His servants to win the hearts of the jailer and his family and this was the only way to get through to them (learn the lesson: what you think are calamities, by God’s grace become avenues of special blessing!).

A severe earthquake (common in that land) had shaken the prison walls, sprung the doors wide open, and loosed the chains. In setting His two servants free God also set all the prisoners free (another little lesson: when God delivered His

people from slavery in Egypt He also delivered the world from the slavery of sin). The jailer thought he would have to pay with his life next morning for the prisoners being freed, for what God had done for his prisoners; so he decided to kill himself. Paul said, no; the gospel hymns that he and Silas had been singing had solemnized the prisoners and now they were ready voluntarily to stay in prison until their cases could be decided, so, don't kill yourself, says Paul (all this is in Acts 16:22-28).

It was pitch dark, of course. In the confusion, the jailer had someone bring in a torch, and "trembling," the fear-laden jailer in Philippi asks the apostles an old covenant question, "What *must I do* to be saved?" and gets a new covenant answer: "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you shall be saved" (Acts 16:30, 31).

Now here's the critical point. The two did not mislead the poor man: they told him the truth, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved, you and your household" (vs. 31; another little point, if papa is truly converted, he will win his family!).

But was mental "believing" all the man had to do? If you want to be saved, is your part simply, raise your hand in the evangelist's meeting, walk down the aisle, get baptized, and presto, you're eternally saved? What does it mean to "believe"?

Was that simplistic and maybe unbalanced? Shouldn't the man be told to keep all the commandments and do good works?

God does not tease someone who sincerely asks, "What must I do to be saved?" When Paul and Silas

answered the jailer in Philippi, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ," they were not giving an unbalanced and thus deceptive answer.

Nicodemus comes to Jesus "by night" (old covenant people love the dark) with some old covenant flattery ("we know You are a teacher come from God") and gets a stark new covenant response: "The son of man must be lifted up so that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life" (John 3:1-15). Believe what?

He answers that question two verses later: "God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish. . . ." (a) Believe that God is a Father. (b) Believe that He loves the world with a love that is *agape*. (c) Believe that His love embraces a sinful world. (d) Believe that His giving was complete—it was not lending. It was not just for time; the giving was for eternity.

Mr. Jailer, you ask "What must I do. . . .?" You must believe that God is your Father in heaven and that He loves you personally, and has adopted you as His child "in Christ."

Too complicated? The Bible explains this simply. The Son "emptied Himself," like pouring out the last drop of a bottle (Phil. 2:7; Isa. 53:12), which means that this love known as *agape* drove Him as far as hell in His search for us as the Good Shepherd (Luke 15:4-7). He died the same death that we would have had to die if He had not come and died it for us! (You can think and think about that for a long time!)

“But,” says the Jailer, “aren’t you leaving out the real answer to my question: the works that I must do?” Yes, he should do them; but it’s not that he *has* to do all these things on pain of God’s rejection; *he will do them* through a heart appreciation of who “the Lord Jesus Christ” is! He has heard Paul declare that what “avails” is “faith working through love [*agape*]” (Gal. 5:6). Such faith works! It’s a verb, not a noun.

One of the psalms that the apostles sang in duet may have been #22—it probes the depths of Christ’s love in giving Himself for us eternally; the jailer was overcome with. . . . what can we call it? faith: a heart appreciation of the “width and length and depth and height [of] . . . the love of Christ which passes knowledge” (Eph. 3:18, 19). It’s not being motivated by terror toiling to do everything just right; it’s faith “constraining” one to join Christ on His cross in self “crucified with Him” (Gal. 2:20).

Can we talk too much about what Christ has done to save us? Should we talk 50% of what He has done, or is doing, and then talk 50% of what we must do to be saved? That 50/50 balance sounds quite reasonable, doesn’t it?

Yes, and millions who say they are Christians view the gospel that way. And they are lukewarm in their devotion to Christ!

Paul didn’t buy into the 50/50 idea. When he came to Corinth he says, “I determined not to know anything among you, save Jesus Christ and Him crucified” (1 Cor. 2:2). Wait a moment, Paul! Aren’t you unbalanced? Sure, preach the cross—but surely not as “everything”? If you talk too much

about what Christ has done to save us, aren’t you afraid that your listeners will get lazy and stop keeping the commandments of God?

No, says Paul: “the preaching of the cross is to them that are perishing foolishness; but unto us who are being saved it is the power of God. . . . We preach Christ crucified. . . Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God” (1:18, 23, 24). Then he adds in vs. 29, “No one can boast in God’s presence.” Now if you are saving yourself 50/50, if you are “trusting” to your “sanctified obedience for salvation,” if you believe that “sanctification . . . in us . . . [is] part of the means of our salvation,” you have plenty to boast about. (I am quoting word for word from an up-to-date publication just came in the mail produced by scholars who tell us how to be saved).

In contrast, Paul says that Christ saves us 100% and that the believer’s part is to *let* Him do it, to cooperate with Him, to respond to the constraint of His love, thankful every step of the way that Christ is the one who is his Saviour *totally*. Paul sees no co-saviors on the believer’s horizon. And if we will listen to Paul preach in Corinth about the cross and believe what we hear him say, our lukewarmness will be finished.

Dumping on people more loads of things to do doesn’t feed their hungry souls. Youth especially get burned out by a sense of unfulfilled obligation laid on them in sermons, chapel talks, religion courses, and Sabbath School classes.

A popular talk show hostess wrote a book, *The Ten Commandments*, which is hailed by some

pastors. She's preaching the solid Old Testament theme of "obey and live," and it sounds fine, doesn't it? Just what our youth need to know—they must learn to obey.

But she doesn't know what Ellen White says about that popular theme of "obey and live": it's "the terms of the old covenant."<sup>1</sup> And where does the old covenant lead us? Into "bondage," another word for slavery (Gal. 4:24). It's spiritual burnout, Laodicean futility, the up-and-down experience that leaves one gasping for a morsel of fresh gospel bread from heaven. It's what many youth are suffering from and don't know it.

Then is it wrong to preach the Ten Commandments? No, but we must make plain their true context—what Exodus 20 is all about. Those "ten" can't be understood except in the light of the new covenant.

We are not reading or quoting them accurately unless we include the preamble: "I am the Lord your God, *who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage [slavery]*" (verse 2). The emphasis is not on a stern Law-Giver, but on a Savior from sin and bondage, not one who threatens us unless we produce impossible works.

And further, the preamble says that His act of salvation is in the past tense, something *already accomplished*, not a "maybe" that is unreal unless you first measure up. In that preamble God was telling Israel, "*You have been saved from Egyptian slavery! I accomplished it!* Remember this glorious

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<sup>1</sup> Ellen G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, p. 372.

Good News!" It was as if He anticipated Isaiah's plea, "Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the hole of the pit from which *you* were dug" (51:1). Don't forget that past history of slavery, He says. It's as if He also anticipated Paul's joyous command, "Present yourselves to God *as being alive from the dead*" (Rom. 6:13), which means, Think of that horrible eternal grave from which you *have been* delivered. Yes, by Christ's sacrifice you've been saved from it forever! The inspired preamble to the Ten Commandments transforms them into the gospel, and should *never* be omitted. But there's more that explains why they are gospel Good News:

"The third angel's message in verity" (the 1888 message) impacts on those Ten Commandments. In two significant statements Ellen White made after 1888, she tells us that rightly understood "the Ten Commandments are ten promises." "There is not a negative in that law, although it may appear thus."<sup>2</sup> In the light of the 1888 message, the Ten Commandments become something totally different than Adventists had ever previously understood—they become *ten positives*.<sup>3</sup>

So? The Lord tells us that if we will *believe* that He has brought us out of "Egypt," out of bondage, then He guarantees that we will never steal, break the Sabbath, fall into idolatry or adultery, etc. Believing the Exodus 20 preamble turns out to be

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<sup>2</sup> *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 1, p. 1105; 1896; 1898.

<sup>3</sup> These Ellen White statements were never made before 1888; she had caught a new insight.

righteousness by faith in a Savior, a power which is stronger than sin, no matter how deeply entrenched the evil has become in our souls.

Another path into bondage that leaves the hungry soul famished is a twisted idea of “relationship.” Often it masks a subliminal legalism lurking in the dark corners of the soul. If we say that people need a “relationship with Jesus,” of course it’s very true. But the inevitable thought will lodge in the mind, “What must I do to initiate this ‘relationship’ with God, and then to maintain it? Maybe I haven’t *done* enough, or tried hard enough, and that’s my problem.”

This is because the “relationship” or “friendship” is said to be something that Jesus *offers* us, and it’s not real unless we establish it. Seldom does anyone recognize that He has *given* it to us. Often it’s presented as dependent on the sinner taking the initiative to get it going, and then it’s up to him somehow to keep it going. Any lapse on our part severs the “relationship,” like a magazine subscription running out, and we are left thinking and feeling that Christ has gone far away. He did His part long ago; He made the “offer;” now we’ve flunked again. And again. And again. Always coming close but never winning the lottery.

Christ has *already initiated* the “relationship” with us; it is *He* who has restored the “friendship.” He is not *offering* to become our Friend; He is telling us that He *is already* our Friend. And He keeps on being our Friend (because His friendship is not based on our merit!) until we irrevocably beat Him off by willful rejection.

Jesus says, “I have called you friends . . . You did not choose Me, but I chose you” (John 15:15, 16). This is why He said, “Abide in Me, and I in you. . . . I am the vine, you are the branches” (verses 4, 5). It’s as if He says, You didn’t graft yourself into the vine; I grafted you. *Now stay where I put you!* He is not like the magazine publisher who drops you when your subscription lapses. The Father does the same thing for you that He did for Jesus when He was a youth: “He awakens Me morning by morning, He awakens My ear to hear as the learned” (Isa. 50:4). He didn’t need an alarm clock. He keeps on telling you, “I stand at the door and knock” (Rev. 3:20). That will awaken you, unless you choose to turn a deaf ear. “Your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, ‘This is the way, walk in it,’ whenever you turn to the right hand or whenever you turn to the left” (Isa. 30:21). He loves you a zillion times more than you have thought He does. He not only initiated this “relationship,” now He seeks to maintain it, too. “From first to last this has been the work of God” (2 Cor. 5:18, NEB).

When you realize how good the *good news* is, your soul will be singing, for you will have lost all sense of “I’ll get to heaven because I’ve done my part.” If some angel tries to give you a crown, you’ll lay it down at His feet. And that sense of gratitude will fuel in your soul *now* a “hunger and thirst for righteousness,” for Bible study, that will never end.

People thought the apostle Paul was unbalanced mentally in his unmeasured devotion to Christ. The story of the Savior’s love at His cross motivated him, pushed him forward relentlessly, so that he

found it impossible to go on living for self. It made him a “new creation” (2 Cor. 5:17). Thus, he says, “we . . . plead with you not to receive the grace of God in vain” (6:1).

In other words, let the grace work, let it have its way! Stop resisting it.

It’s not cold “doctrine” for the theologians to wrangle over; it’s day-by-day practical living as the liberating ministry of what grace does.

Our believing is the door that “provides access by faith into this grace in which we stand” (Rom. 5:1, 2). Yes, our part is important.

“The gift by the grace . . . abounded to [the] many,” that is, everybody (vs. 15). Someone wisely said that “in the matchless gift of His Son God has encircled the whole world with an atmosphere of grace as real as the air which circulates around the globe. All who choose to breathe this life-giving atmosphere will live, and grow up to the stature of men and woman in Christ Jesus.” Is it such “hard work” to be saved as we have thought? “Breathe . . . !” (Well, yes, the “choosing”—that’s the so-called hard work, isn’t it? Shame on us for twisting the message and even imagining that that’s “hard”!)

Walk outdoors and fill your lungs with fresh air; then ask if you could breathe any more if you were the only person on earth. An infinite heavenly Father has created the whole world just for you.

Then look at all those we-thought-were-wicked-people also filling their lungs with that same atmosphere of grace; who knows who of them will respond at last as “Elijah” gets busy “turn[ing] hearts.”

That grace “abounds” more than all the pits of sin we’ve managed ourselves to fall into (vss. 20, 21; cf. Prov. 22:14). That’s stupendous!

It makes it impossible for the one who believes to continue in sin! Captivity to evil habits, drugs, alcohol, pornography, the apparently endless alienations from love—are vanquished. Grace imposes a new captivity, this time to the love of Christ. You’ll never be your own again. You’ve already received the grace; “let it not be in vain.”