

Liberty University Commencement Address

By Former U.S. President Jimmy Carter

Lynchburg, Virginia

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To Dr. Hawkins, who is retiring now as provost of this great university, and to Secretary Carson, who is here, whom I have admired for a long time, to President Falwell and all of his family, to the students who are graduating, to the parents who have supported them, and to all the rest of you: This is a wonderful crowd. Jerry told me before we came here that it's even bigger — I hate to say this — than it was last year. I don't know if President Trump will admit that or not, but to me it means a lot.

I am truly grateful for the invitation to speak to the graduates of this remarkable Christian university. I understand that there are 110,000 students enrolled, and also that also this year 20,000 or more are graduating, that 30,000 students who enrolled here are in the military, and that 27 percent of all those online are minority students — African American and others. This is an all-new way to get an education, and I want to thank Liberty University for giving that opportunity to them. Also, I've notice that among the graduates, the youngest one is only 16 years old, and the oldest one is almost 90 years old. (It's a female, and she doesn't want anyone to know who she is, because she doesn't want anyone to know her age, but she's four years younger than I am.) The students contribute almost a million hours a year of service to other people.

I have to admit that I was somewhat surprised to be invited to speak to you, and I want to thank President Falwell for making it possible for me to do so.

I remember receiving a whole lot of letters from Liberty University students and faculty when I was in the White House. Most of them referred to my giving away our Panama Canal, or forming what they considered to be an unnecessary new Department of Education, or normalizing diplomatic relations with the communist government of China. But those critical letters pretty well ended when the 1980 election results brought my involuntary retirement from the White House. After that, I didn't get very many letters from Liberty, and I particularly appreciate the opportunity to come here today.

President Falwell wanted me to say a few words about my background. It might duplicate some of the things he just said — and correct a few minor mistakes that he made. I grew up on a peanut farm near Plains, Georgia, in a community named Archery, with about 50 other families, almost all of whom were African American. And so were my playmates. It was during segregation time, but the only ranking among us then was who could run fastest, had just caught the biggest fish, or could pick the most cotton in a day.

I left home when I was 17 years old, and World War II was just beginning; this was in 1941. I went to Georgia Tech, where I joined the Naval ROTC. Then I went on to the Naval Academy at Annapolis, and that's where I began to teach Bible lessons on Sunday. As a matter of fact, I taught the children of the families that were stationed there permanently. I later served as a submarine officer, and my last sea duty, at sea in the Pacific Ocean, was during the Korean War. I served in the Navy for 11 years, and then I came back to Plains, Georgia, and to a life of farming.

One of the most memorable occasions I had then was to volunteer as part of what the Southern Baptist Convention called a “pioneer missionary” program. Every year, I would go somewhere, assigned by the Southern Baptist Convention to bring other people to Christ. One of my most memorable was to go to Massachusetts, and I had a leader there who was from Brooklyn, New York. He was a Cuban American, and his name was Eloy Cruz. I would read a few verses from the Bible in Spanish (using a different Spanish vocabulary than I had used in the Navy) and then Eloy Cruz would give the plan of salvation to prospective followers of Christ. And he was remarkably successful in winning those souls to be Christians.

When we finished our assignment in Massachusetts and got ready to leave to go back home, I asked Eloy Cruz, “What is the secret to your success in winning souls to Christ?” He was a little embarrassed by my question, but then he finally said, “I try to have two loves in my heart: One love is for God, and the other love I have in my heart is for the person who happens to be in front of me at any particular time.” That’s a very profound statement, and one that I have remembered ever since that time.

Since leaving the White House, I have been a professor at Emory University — I just finished my 36th year as a professor — and I still teach Sunday school at Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Georgia. Plains is a town of 700 people — It’s grown a lot since I was a child — and we have 11 churches in town. Maranatha is a very small church; we only have about 25 regular members, but when I teach the Bible classes every Sunday we have several hundred visitors. Last Sunday we had 700 visitors; we had to turn away 200 who we couldn’t get into the church or in our classrooms.

I have made a living writing — Jerry said 29 books; actually, I’ve written 32 books, and I gave him a copy of one of them last night so he could remember how many books I’ve written. And Rosalynn and I have not been married quite as long as he said.

If we stay together for two more months, Rosalynn and I will celebrate our 72nd anniversary as a married couple.

Rosalynn and I founded and still work at The Carter Center, where we try to do two things: One is to promote peace, and the other one is to be a champion of human rights. This is a major operation, and we’ve had programs in 80 countries of the world, trying to bring peace and democracy and freedom, and a better life for the people who live there. It’s a big job. For instance, in Ethiopia, we have trained almost 37,000 nurses — it took us 10 years to do it — and now, when we go to Ethiopia to treat diseases like trachoma and others, we can treat as many as 10 million people in five days with the help of those 37,000 nurses. This is more people than live in the state of Virginia or the state of Georgia.

We try to eradicate some of these neglected diseases — do away with them completely, all over the world. In fact, at The Carter Center we have the only organization on earth that analyzes constantly every human illness, to see which ones might be eliminated completely from one country or one region, or eradicated from the entire earth. One of our programs is against Guinea worm. Guinea worm grows to a length of about 36 inches long in the human body after the human drinks filthy water from a stagnant pond. Then, about a year later, that worm emerges from the body through an excruciatingly painful sore. Farmers can’t go to the field and children can’t go to school. To start with, we found 3.5 million cases of Guinea worm in 21 different countries. As of the beginning of this month, which is the last report I’ve had, we only have three cases in the whole world now, in the country of Chad.

For 35 years, Rosalynn and I have volunteered to lead an annual Habitat [for Humanity] work project somewhere, one year overseas and the next in America. This year we're going to be near South Bend, Indiana; last year we were in Canada. Our biggest project was in the Philippines a number of years ago. We had 14,000 other volunteers join me and Rosalynn, and in five days we started and completed 293 homes for people who are desperately poor. The woman who would live in our house had three daughters, and before she got her new home, she and her daughters spent every night in an abandoned septic tank; they pulled a canvas cover over the top of it to keep the rain out. I understand that you resident students at Liberty are building Habitat houses here in Lynchburg. I hope you will keep up your work because Habitat needs you every day.

As a younger person, I lived during two serious crises, much worse than anything we face today. One was the Great Depression when I was a child growing up on a farm, and the second one was the Second World War.

When I face difficult times, I remember the advice that my favorite schoolteacher used to give us. Miss Julia Coleman would tell us students: "We must accommodate changing times, but cling to principles that never change."

All of us Americans now have other crises to face. Let me mention a few: I remember back in 1999, toward the end of that year, I was asked to make two major speeches; one was in Taiwan, and the other was in Oslo, Norway. The subject I was assigned to talk about was, "What is the greatest challenge the world faces or will face in the new millennium." I said it was the great disparity in wealth between the richest people and those who still worked for a living with their families. Since then, this disparity in wealth has gotten much greater, both within nations and between nations. Right now, for instance, eight people (six of them Americans) control more wealth than the poorest 3.5 billion — half of the world's total population.

Recently I've changed my mind about the biggest challenge that the world faces. I think now it's a human rights problem, and it is the discrimination against women and girls in the world. Let me give you a couple of examples. There are about 160 million girls and women who are not living today because their parents, in order to comply with laws or customs, had to have just male babies, sons, and either had to kill their babies by strangling them at birth, or having the modern-day ability to determine before the baby is born what gender it is going to be, if the fetus is female, then they abort the child. Atlanta, where The Carter Center is located, is the greatest center for human trafficking, or slavery, in America. One reason is we have the busiest airport in America for passengers, and a lot of our passengers come from the Southern Hemisphere. A girl who is brown-skinned or black-skinned can be sold, according to the New York Times, to a brothel owner for about \$1,000, and a brothel owner makes about \$35,000 for these forced brothel prostitutes.

Also, the last time we did a check on our military, it was found that there were about 16,000 cases of sexual abuse every year in the U.S. military, probably one of the finest organizations on earth.

The portion of people in prison has also skyrocketed in recent decades — there are more than seven times as many Americans in prison as there were when I left the White House, more than any other country on Earth. We also know that the partisan and racial divisions in our country are becoming deeper and deeper.

All our major religions are also divided — Protestant, Catholic, Jewish, Islamic, I'm sure Hinduism and Buddhism. On two occasions, you might be interested to know, in 1981 I brought about 40 of the top Southern Baptists together at The Carter Center in Atlanta. I was just out of the White House, and when I asked them to come, they came. Seven of those mostly men who came would become presidents of the Southern Baptist Convention. We tried but failed to resolve the differences between us and keep all of the Baptists together. One of the differences we couldn't resolve was the equal status of women.

I am glad to say that our common faith in worshipping Jesus Christ, though, is slowly bringing us back together, and Jerry and I talked last night about the possibility that he and I — and all of you, I hope — will work as much as we can to unify all Christians in the world. We as Baptists, most of all, ought to be able to come together as friends and not be alienated one from another.

More recently, the threat of nuclear war has become more acute, America has abandoned its leadership as the world's champion of a clean and healthy environment, broad confidence in our public officials has gone down, and we citizens have tended to lose faith in ourselves and in each other. We've also lost our support and our commitment to those "principles that never change," but I'm very glad to say that most of you have chosen the unchangeable principles of Christianity.

Only one time in human history have people tried to adopt these high principles that never change and are worthy of adopting. That was after the death of more than 60 million people in the Second World War, and the Holocaust that was orchestrated by Adolf Hitler. I monitored those proceedings closely from the deck of the first ship where I was assigned after I finished at Annapolis, when the United Nations was established to make sure there was never any more armed conflict between people. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights was adopted to ensure that everybody would be treated equally and would have justice. We know that the United Nations has failed to bring peace, and universal human rights have not been realized.

However, we also know that the modern ability to travel rapidly and instantly communicate, along with the wide use of social media, have brought an enormous step toward a truly global society for the first time. We evangelical Christians — and I consider myself to be one of them, one of you — must use this world coming-together and communicating instantly with each other to promote the word of the gospel about Jesus Christ.

Theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, one of my favorites, used these words: "The sad duty of politics is to establish justice in a sinful world." This in itself would be a great achievement. But we Christians know that there is one step greater than just bringing justice to our society, and that is to promote the use of agape love — self-sacrificial love — among people.

When I became president, before I was inaugurated, I was given a briefing by the military leaders of our country. I learned, really for the first time, that if I permitted a nuclear war, the use of atomic weapons, the arsenals of the Soviet Union and the United States alone might — would — end the ability of all human beings and animals to survive. Because of the direct explosions, the atomic fallout, and the covering of the sky by dark clouds of smoke and debris from the nuclear devices. No human being and no animal could survive a nuclear war. We now still have that great responsibility and threat, and we have to share it with seven or eight other countries: Russia, France, Great Britain, China, Israel, India, Pakistan, and perhaps North Korea.

With this threat to human existence, what then can you and I do about it? For a long time, humans had to contend with animals, and we depended on our speed, our agility, our strength just to survive in our competition with animals. Now, for several generations, human intelligence and the weapons we have developed permit us to prevail over other animals. So what is there to do? How can we prevail as human beings? One of the things we have to learn is how to get along, to do good for one another, and to get along with our potential enemies instead of how we can prevail in combat. In other words, just follow the mandates of the Prince of Peace: just learning how to live with our enemies in peace is what Jesus taught. And that will be our only chance for survival in the future.

We don't need enemies to fight, nor do we need inferior people whom we can dominate. Let me just quote this one verse of scripture, in Galatians 3:28: "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor master, there is neither male nor female, for ye are all one in Christ Jesus."

So far, we Americans down through history have had a hard time adjusting to this concept of equality: We fought the Civil War, the War Between the States, that finally ended slavery; in the 1920s and then 40 years later we had a struggle in our country with granting white women and then black women 40 years later the right to vote; and more recently we have been struggling to end racial segregation. Even now, some of us are still struggling to accept the fact that all people are equal in the eyes of God.

As when I was in the Navy and when I was president, I want the United States to be strong enough so that we never have to prove we are strong. But there are attributes of a superpower that go beyond military strength; it's the same as those of a person. Our nation should be known as the champion of peace. Our nation should be known as the champion of equality. Our nation should be known as the champion of human rights. We should also be admired for our generosity to other people in need, and other moral values. In other words, for those principles that never change. There is no reason why the United States of America cannot epitomize these high virtues.

Despite all these challenges that I've already outlined, maybe to your discouragement, as a Christian I believe that the ultimate fate of human beings will be good, with God's love prevailing.

As new graduates, you are probably now blessed with the maximum freedom you will ever know. In the past, your parents and others have had a major influence over your lives, and in years ahead you'll also have a major influence from the job that you accept or the career that you choose – and also from the husband or wife that you might choose. So right now, in fact, you now have maximum opportunity to use three gifts that God gives every one of us: life, freedom, and in effect a guarantee that every single one of us will have enough talent and enough opportunity to live a completely successful life be a success – as judged by God.

We may not be rich. We may not live to be an old person. We may not have many loyal friends. And neither did Jesus have any of those things, but he lived a perfect life.

Without any interference from anybody else, all by ourselves, we have complete freedom to make a judgment. Everyone decides: "This is the kind of person I choose to be." We decide whether we tell the truth or benefit from telling lies. We're the ones that decide: "Do I hate? Or am I filled with love?" We're the ones who decide: "Will I think only about myself, or do I care for others?" We ourselves make these decisions, and no one else.

There are no limits to our ambition as a human being, and we have available to us, every one of us, constant contact with God in heaven, the creator of a universe and the creator of each one of us. How many of us decide ahead of time when we're going to be born, or where we will be born, or who our parents will be, or what our native intelligence level will be? You see, through prayer, we can have constant contact, day or night, with our Creator, who knows everything and can do anything. And we have a perfect example to follow if we're in doubt: We just have to remember the perfect life of Jesus Christ.

Thank you very much, and congratulations to all of you.