



# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *Finding the Love in Paul*

### *“Part 1: What it means to be ‘In Christ’”*

A St. Andrew’s Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
April 12, 2026

**Scripture Reading:** Galatians 3:23-29 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

*Before faith came, we were under the constraint of the Law, locked in until the faith that was coming would be revealed. In other words, the Law was our monitor until Christ came to bring about our justification through faith. But now that faith is here, we are no longer in the monitor’s charge. Each one of you is a child of God because of your faith in Christ Jesus. All of you who have been baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. In Christ there is no Jew or Greek, slave or citizen, male or female. All are one in Christ Jesus. Furthermore, if you belong to Christ, you are the off-spring of Abraham, which means you inherit all that was promised.*

### Sermon

We’re beginning a new series today on finding the love in Paul.

Paul is kind of a villain in progressive theology, progressive religion. Jesus is the nice guy, good cop/bad cop with Paul. What are some of the stereotypes that you may be bringing about Paul? What, what images pop to mind?

*[Comments from the Congregation]: “Wives obey your husbands. Misogyny. Homophobic. He’s a jerk.” (laughter)*

Okay, so that’s sort of the summary. Actually, that was the summary in the first service too. And what a lot of people don’t know about Paul is that not every book that’s attributed to Paul in Christian Scripture was written by the same person. There was a School of Paul afterwards. And it’s very easy to pick those books out because the sentences become very long. The words are rambling. It sounds very religious, unlike a lot of Paul. And it’s a call to obedience, not to this revolution of love.

Paul was not perfect, but there’s nobody in the ancient world who you want to imitate in today’s world. So Aristotle was a jerk. Socrates was a jerk. But don’t you want to learn from them? You

don't want to end there. You don't want that to be the *last* word. But it's really good to know what your ancestors thought. And the mistakes are just as important as the rest of it.

The reason that fundamentalists don't realize *that* is that they don't read the biblical languages, for the most part. They *love* the Bible, but not enough to learn the original languages. They take it literally in English. They don't learn textual criticism. They don't learn the history of how those documents were put together, because then you'd never take it literally. So, there's not one manuscript that survived. It's fragments, thousands of fragments sewn together, and they don't agree with one another. And that's our starting place.

The reason I want to talk about this is not because I want to criticize somebody else. *If* fundamentalism left people alone, I wouldn't have anything to say about it. But it *doesn't*. And what it says is that you're not as good of a Christian because you're not homophobic like Paul. You're not as good a Christian because you're not misogynist like Paul. You're not as good of a Christian because you're not theocratic like Paul. In this series, I want to show that that was not Paul at all.

That's what some translators have done. That's what some interpreters have done. But Paul was a very ancient ancestor who was trying to set people free. He was trying to bring together the Pagan world and the Jewish world.

It was actually in reading Hinduism where I realized what those words 'in Christ' may have meant to somebody like Paul. In Hinduism, there's a thing called the *Mahatman*, the "great self." And when you read Hindu scriptures, you see "I am" sayings just like you find in John. But it's a lot easier to see that this is a person who's so in tune with the cosmos that it's as though they're speaking as the creative principle of the universe, trying to help you find that voice within yourself.

But they have to start where we are. They have to start with the sense of being lost, the sense of being an isolated ego in the world, a little bubble that's just about to pop. So almost in all these wonderful mystical religions around the world, you fall in love with Jesus or Buddha or Krishna, and then they lead you to the greater self. They teach you how to live in the whole of things.

The word "salvation," one of the interpretations is it means wholeness, healing. So, it doesn't just heal the individual, it heals the world itself. The broken, frightened world that we find ourselves living in today. There's nothing selfish about healing yourself, finding out who you are. It's what the world is crying for in many ways. I want to read some of the wonderful passages that were important to me.

When I got to college, I knew I'd been propagandized. I knew there was something there I loved in the Sermon on the Mount, that there was something that I was going to organize my life around in the Sermon on the Mount. But I also knew that there was a stupidity and a meanness in what I'd been taught. And it was like a lens. I couldn't even see that I was living in my privilege, because that was the lens I was looking through.

Right close to where I lived when I was in school, there was a bookstore called Grok Bookstore. It's an old-time hippie store, UT people may remember. *(Laughter)* It's now BookPeople. So, I went and I said, *"I know that I've got a lot of nonsense in my head, but I don't know how to even start. Do you have any suggestions?"*

And he just gave me world scriptures. *The Upanishads. Bhagavad Gita, Dhammapada, Lao Tzu.*

And I slowly began to work my way out and realized it's the same truths with different inflections. And the point for all of us is to come into the common life, to see the stranger as an extension of myself and myself as an extension of the stranger. I was reading this by the swimming pool of my apartment. *(Laughter)* This is Krishna speaking in the *Bhagavad Gita*.

*I am the same to all beings, and my love is ever the same. For one who sees me in everything and everything in me, I am never lost, nor are they ever lost to me.*

Think of the "I am" sayings in John. *"For one who sees me in everything and everything in me, I'm never lost, for they are never lost to me."*

And then Buddha:

*Just as a mother with her life protects her child that was her only child, so you should love every living being with unbounded consciousness.*

Which to me sounds like *"the only begotten one of God."* We are to love each other as only children.

And then the Buddha said, *"if you truly loved yourself, you could never hurt another."*

Because what we do to each other we're doing to our larger self. We may not be able to feel it all the time, but eventually that pain comes back. And the world we see is people who are living in that fear and thinking selfishness will make them happy.

The reason people had rituals in the ancient world, often to initiate them into a greater understanding. So, Baptism, Communion, were art pieces that help someone become larger. You can't just think about unity. Your idea of unity becomes divisive. Think about it. We fight over our sense of what the "one" is. But if we can feel a kindred sympathy, then there is a tie that binds us together that we can feel.

Paul says that *"we were under the law."* This is like the Bible, the law. For them, that was the Bible. *"We were under the law until faith came."* Does that sound like somebody who's legalistic? We were given the law, he says, as a monitor, as a babysitter. As training wheels.

And in Galatians he can say *"you're no longer under the law. In fact, you're under a curse because you can't fulfill it, and you know you can't."* Paul was trying to set people free from the law, not perfectly. He had his bad traits. But what a gift just to point in that direction.

The religion we were given as children was the only starting place we could have possibly had. It has to be small enough and safe enough for a child to understand it. So, a Buddha or a Jesus or a Krishna, a great teacher, becomes a face that you can trust. But they don't leave you there. They don't leave you in the nest. The whole point is to nurture you until you can find your own wings.

Around the world, the sky represents the common life. And the whole point of mysticism, as best I understand it, is to live in the whole of things. We can't always do that. We need a nest that's there for when we collapse. But *sometimes* we can spread our wings. And what Paul is saying is, "*it's okay to be smarter than me. I want you to be smarter than me. It's okay for you to be kinder than me. I want that.*"

But to do that, we have to let go of the past and choose love. So, Paul started with almost like child psychology. When you look at his books, he's really trying to reason people out of their prejudice. When all you have is *that*, it looks really bad. Can you imagine somebody recorded a conversation you had with one of your kids? When you're completely off balance, and you were just lying to set it up where they just wouldn't kill themselves. And somebody recorded it and made a Bible out of it. *(Laughter)*

That's what happened to Paul. You're seeing letters to other people. So, when a literalist comes in the office to tell me that I'm going to Hell, I look at Romans and say, if you're going to take that literally, take the first words literally.

It's to the *Romans*. It's not to *you*. Corinthians is to the *Corinthians*, not to *you*. So, take that literally, and then you'll see the rest of it needs to be understood figuratively if you're going to share in the truth that's there.

A great teacher feels the creative impulse of the universe. It can be called "God," it doesn't have to be called "God." But somehow what we know is we're all coming from something and there's some kind of creativity that brings us into being. And that is the very core of our being. That is the most important treasure that we have. That is the pearl of great price. Being "in Christ" does not mean joining the Christian church. Some of the cruelest people I've ever met were loyal members of the Christian church.

Being "in Christ" means loving like Jesus loved, and you have to think of it poetically. It's like falling in love. When you fall in love, you hear music everywhere. That's not going to last real long probably, but . . . *(Laughter)*

When Jesus looks at people and they love him, and he says, I'm the door. Any person you love can be the door to where you're trying to get. Jesus said, "*I'm the door, I'm the path. I'm the way.*" It's like all these things are things you go through to get to your source, to get to that creative principle that's calling you into being.

In Christ, Paul says, there's neither Jew nor Greek. Does that sound like a Christian extremist? There's no Christian. There's no Jewish. No atheist. There's something deeper than that in people. Some of the kindest people you'll ever meet are not believers.

On Palm Sunday, I read a part from a sermon that Martin Luther King gave where he said the greatest Christian in the 20th century was a Hindu named Gandhi. That had to go really great. *(Laughter)* But it's why Christian nationalism is so *confused* and so self-defeating. *That's* not the love you're looking for. We have to go deeper. So, Paul says, "*you are all children of God.*" Does that sound like the Paul you were taught? "*In Christ, you're all children of God.*" Do you see any finger wagging there?

So, when somebody tells you you're not a good Christian because you don't hate the same people Paul did, you know they don't understand their Bible, not even 101. When they say you're not taking charge of your household, *that's* not what Paul is saying here. This Paul is saying "*in Christ there's neither male nor female.*" Can there be LGBTQ if there's no male or female? No, there's human beings. And it's more spiritual to accept people wherever they are than to try to peg them in a certain theological framework. I call it the "theology of the groin." *(Laughter)* And that's the idea of trying to evaluate humankind based on how they use their pelvic area.

And what I think Paul would say is, "*if you can't get past somebody's pelvis, they're not the pervert.*" *(Laughter)*

"*In Christ, there's neither slave nor free, slave nor master.*" Now, people look at Paul and say he condones slavery. I don't know. I mean, that's not coming from this part of Paul. But if you believe in capitalism, you're not that different.

If you believe that people have a right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness if they can afford it, you're not that far removed from the belief in slavery. If you believe people can be born into poverty and stay in poverty, that's the same material-based, property-based misunderstanding of humankind that Paul is calling us out of, that being "in Christ" calls us out of it.

I had somebody write on my Facebook page to criticize me, believe it or not. *(Laughter)* "*The Bible says that marriage is between one man and one woman.*" Now, I decided to put him on the pony and ride him around the track a little bit. *(Laughter)* Because he's attacking people. He doesn't even know how hateful he is. And I said, "*Who in the Bible? Show me. How many wives did David have? How many wives did Solomon have? How many wives did Abraham have? One man, one woman. You're lying. You're lying and you're hurting other people in the name of the one that wants to set them free.*"

It's Paul that says, "*for freedom Christ has set you free.*" It's not obedience. It's not a sacred hierarchy with Jesus on the top. It's a call to break every chain, to set every person free.

So, let's see if we can wrap this up.

I know that Paul looks like a jerk if you don't understand that a lot of the phrases are not coming from Paul, and if you don't realize that every person from the past looks bad in the present context. But we *need* the ancestors. We need the *stories*. We need the *mistakes* even. And I *truly* believe that what Paul is saying is being "in Christ" does not mean being a member of the Christian church. It means loving the way that Jesus loved.

It means when you say that God is your parent, that you're really saying all humankind is your family. And the animals and the plants are part of your larger self. That you're not looking for Christianity to be a place where people think the same way you do. You're looking for love that's bigger than that. They can get past our differences, and we can disagree with each other fundamentally and still serve love. A love that's bigger than gender, that's bigger than nation.

When a Christian says that you should love Americans and *hate* Iranians, or *murder* Iranians, or *murder* Venezuelans, they do not understand the first thing, not even the first thing, about being “in Christ.”

But most importantly, within you is a call to freedom. You are an expression of the creative principles of the universe, and that is the deepest and truest thing about you. And the great teachers of love are trying to call you to that. There's nothing wrong with retreating to your nest from time to time. But there's a greatness within you that calls you to maturity, to outgrow Paul and everybody else, and to find your own wings, and to find flight that leads you into the common sky so that you can live in love in the whole of things.

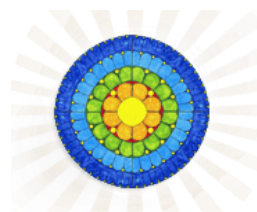
Thank you for your attention. We'll take a moment for you to think about how you would have preached this. Just don't tell me! (*Laughter*)

## Benediction

Rev. Carol Johnson

And now, go out knowing that you are loved just as you are. And may that love hold as the center even when things start to fall apart. And may joy arrive without permission. Not as a solution, but as a stubborn companion in the midst of everything else that is happening. Amen.

*Transcribed and edited by a member of the St. Andrew's Sermon Transcription Project.*



### St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church

14311 Wells Port Dr.  
Austin, TX 78728  
512-251-0698  
admin@staopen.org