



# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *Finding the Love in Paul*

### *“Part 2: Defanging Romans”*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
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**Scripture Reading:** Romans 1:18-32 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

*At the same time, however, God's passionate and just anger is also being revealed; it rages from heaven against all of humankind's willful impiety and refusal to honor God, against the injustices committed by people who actively suppress the truth through their injustice. For what is knowable about God is plain and obvious to everyone; indeed, it is God who has made it obvious to them. Though invisible to the eye, God's eternal power and divinity have been seen since the creation of the universe, understood and clearly visible in all of nature. Humankind is, therefore, without excuse.*

*For although they knew God, they didn't give God honor or praise and never even said, "Thank you"; instead, their reasoning became increasingly empty and inept, and their undiscerning hearts were darkened. Professing to be wise, they became fools: they exchanged the glory of the immortal and incorruptible God for mere images—images of mortal, corruptible humans, and birds, animals and reptiles. So God gave them over to their hearts' desire—to promiscuous immorality, to the devaluing of their bodies with each other. They exchanged the reality of God for a lie, and worshiped and served what was created rather than the Creator, who is forever praised. Amen. That is why God turned them over to their demeaning passions. Their women went from having sexual relations that were natural for them to relations that were contrary to their own natures. And their men who would have naturally had sexual relations with women abandoned those ways and became consumed with burning passions for one another. Thus both sexes acted against their nature and received in their own personalities the consequences of their error. Furthermore, since they didn't think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, God abandoned them to their own depraved minds. They were driven to do things that shouldn't be done and were filled with every kind of injustice, evil, greed and malice. They became full of envy, murder, bickering, treachery and deceit.*

*They became gossips, slanderers, God-haters; they were insolent, arrogant and boastful, inventors of evil, and rebellious to their parents. They were senseless, faithless, heartless and ruthless. And even though they knew God's just mandate—that everyone who does such things deserves death—they not only continued to do these things, but encouraged others to do the same.*

# Sermon

Good morning. Thanks for sharing the morning with us. We're doing a series on Paul.

Today's gonna be kind of interesting, because we're looking at probably the most abused passage in Paul. As we've seen and will continue to see, not everything that's attributed to Paul was written by Paul.

There was a school after Paul was done that wrote in his name. And if you look at the Greek, it's very clear the sentences get longer, the vocabulary changes, it starts ordering people around. So, a lot of people or people that people hate when they hate Paul are people who came after Paul was done.

Not saying that Paul is perfect. There's no one from antiquity who you'd want to copy. There's no one in antiquity that you should surrender your agency to and do what they say. But we want to learn from our ancestors. We want roots. We want it to be the first word in a conversation, not the last word in our deliberations.

So, I will refer to the passage. This is the Romans passage that has been used to attack LGBTQ people for a very long time. I'm hoping after today, if this is a passage that's been used against you, that you will never be hurt by it again when you realize how it's been distorted and misused. And if it doesn't apply to you personally, to realize the violence of using scripture in this way to scapegoat people, to judge people and to realize that's not Christianity. That's not what Jesus taught. It's not what Paul taught.

So, usually in progressive churches, Jesus is kind of the good cop and Paul's the bad cop. And that's okay. You don't have to like Paul at all. Just some background just to realize that I don't think he ever intended his letters to become universal. I think he was writing to particular people. And whenever I get attacked by a literalist quoting Romans, uh, I say, if you're going to take this book literally start with the title. This is to the Romans. This is not to you. Corinthians was written to the Corinthians. So that gives it a kind of a frame to not use without discernment, these efforts to develop an early Church. I want to read a bit of the passage that many people read understandably thinking this is an attack on LGBTQ people.

In this passage, it says,

*There are women went from having sexual relations that were natural for them to relations that were contrary to their own natures. And their men, who would have naturally had sexual relations with women, abandoned those ways and became consumed with burning passions for one another.*

If that's all you saw, I can understand where somebody would maybe make that assumption.

But if we use the standard of the law of not accusing people without evidence, and realize if a passage can be taken two ways, you owe it to the other person to err towards the charity, to err

towards not judging. There's nothing clear in all of the teachings of Jesus that we shouldn't trust our own judgments of one another.

Now Paul is trying to build an early Church, and the problem that he has is they have got two people, two groups of people who don't like each other very much. One of the groups is called Jews, although it's sort of like in Texas when you call people Baptists. There's a stereotype there. So, "religious conservative" might be a better translation of it. But a group of people who only know their own tribe. And so, when they see somebody who thinks differently, they think it's a heretic. They see somebody who lives differently, they think that they're a sinner.

On the other side, what's called the Greeks might be "the woke". It might be the secular, non-religious. And the tendency there was to think that everybody who's religious is superstitious and a little bit of an idiot. It's people who attack religion without ever defining the word, and assume that anyone who identifies as religious must be as stupid as their version of religion is.

So, Paul's got to try to build a bridge between these two groups, and they're both going to have to change some if that's going to happen. And if you think about the United States right now, that's the bridge that we're needing. And it's going to be just as hard as it was then, if not harder.

So, Paul's going to introduce an idea that's backfired big time over the centuries, but it's "original sin". And his purpose is to get both sides to stop thinking they're better than the other side and to get them to start on the same page.

If you think about it, for human beings to think that we have objective grasp on reality is kind of funny. We're mammals. We're little bitty primates in a very big scary world. And one of the things that we're not capable of is pure objectivity.

So, what Jesus was teaching, and now Paul's taking up, was that our judgments of each other was the problem. When I think my subjective understanding of you is an objective description of you, it's going to be very, very hard for us to communicate, for me to be fair to you. When I live in my judgments of you, when I see you, I think of how you've hurt me. This is an example. Nobody's hurt me here. Or when I see you, if I do a scan of the mistakes I've seen you make. That is a major problem in the world. So, how do we get past that?

There are three things I want to point out about this passage that I never saw before I went to seminary. I didn't see it in seminary, but it's really clear now that these are important factors. When I got out of seminary, first thing I did was start reading the early Church. There was an early church leader, Hippolytus, who looked at this passage and said this is about idolatry. I think it was the religion of Attis that he's talking about. Where when it talks about the shapes of reptiles and birds in the story, that's not talking about sexual morality. It goes deeper than that.

In the ancient world, Rome, Persia, Greece crushed the local cultures. The religions went into despair. And some of them became very pathological. In some of the religions, they started practicing temple prostitution. And the idea is in fertility cultures where you're trying to get good crops that the priesthood would say, if you pay us money and you perform with us, then your crops will be good.

There were also mutilation cults, and that's probably what Paul is talking about here, where people were so ashamed of their bodies in these dying religions that they would mutilate themselves. And the women would try to act out as men, the men would try to act out as women, but they were trying to get away from their bodies. They were trying to be purely spiritual. It's hard for us to grasp the pain that would make that happen.

But if you lived in a religion that had been crushed by an empire, none of the sacrifices would work anymore. None of the teachings would work anymore. And so, there'd be a kind of pathological stage, and Paul is trying to build a bridge out of that and into a new possibility. Last week we saw that when he talked about being in Christ, he wasn't just talking about the Church. He was talking about a new frame of mind that could see all of humankind as one family.

In this case, Paul is talking about the difference between magical religion and religion of spiritual principles. When we reduce religion to magical claims, it's impossible to get to the invisible principles like justice, truth.

And one of the most painful parts of the MAGA movement is that it has renounced truth. It's renounced the idea of truth. It's renounced the idea of justice. And what you have are very strong images. The image of Trump as Jesus was kind of interesting. The denial was maybe more interesting than the original posting, which is, I'm really a doctor dressed like Jesus with light coming out of my hands with angels up in the sky. But anyone who follows that is desperate. Anyone who follows that has lost hope.

And if we're going to heal the world, we have to feel the despair underneath what looks like hatred. It is very hateful for certain people, and we have to struggle against the actions and the words, but we also can't dehumanize the people that are doing it. Again, Paul is walking a line here.

Do you remember when Trump was asked what Bible verse he liked, and he said it was too personal? It's not so personal that they can't cram it down your throat. It's not so personal that they can't turn America into theocracy. And you see all these scenes with people praying over him.

That's despair. The idolatry that Paul is condemning is religion that's lost the sense of transcendence. So, it only works with that tribe. The problem with idolatry is we get lost in the images. Now with AI, that's gone to a whole new level.

We have to hold on to our humanity. We have to hold on to nature and let go of this cascade of images bombarding us. So, it's just as important now as it was then to renounce the religion of imagery and look for the principles that would work for all people. The images come from your tribe. But what are the principles that would unite you with other people, even if they're different?

So, Paul says that these people have surrendered anything that's transcendent, and now they're being bombarded by images. And he says, therefore God gave them up, sort of to the desires of

their heart, to their appetites. When you don't have transcendence, all you have are your judgments and your appetites. And those will tear you apart. If you don't have an organizing principle to hold your life together, you'll be drawn and quartered by your very desires.

When homophobic theologians look at this verse and they see words like perversion, sexual immorality, they think of their enemies. The word "homosexual" was not invented back then. It was in the 1900s that it was invented. Neither Greek nor Hebrew has a word for it. So, when you see somebody say that they're speaking literally, it just means they don't know Hebrew or Greek. They're taking the English literally. Paul gives a list here. I'm going to read the list, and one thing that you will not hear is homosexuality or any other moral infraction. 'Cause it's second-rate religion that focuses on moralism. The call is to justice. And a religion that doesn't call you to justice is in its death throes.

Here's the list. It says

*They were driven to do things that shouldn't be done and were filled with every kind of injustice, evil, greed, and malice. They became full of envy, murder, bickering, treachery, deceit.*

Does this sound more like homosexuality or the MAGA movement?

*They were slanderers, insolent, arrogant, boastful, inventors of evil, rebellious to their parents, They were senseless, faithless, heartless, and ruthless.*

Pete Hegseth with his crusader tattoos, with his celebration of violence, to him that's Christianity.

But I want you to listen to the first century. This is Hippolytus again. He said

*A soldier being inferior in rank to God must not kill anyone if ordered to do so. He must not carry out the order, nor may he take an oath to do so. If he does not accept this, let him be dismissed from the church.*

Now, if you're a soldier, don't feel bad, because it also said not to let actors in or pantomimes. So again, we don't take anything literally. But the early Church assumed that murdering your human family was a sin. And so, you had to transcend your tribe. Your country. You couldn't just kill people you didn't know, because somebody you didn't know told you to do it.

If we know anything at all about the President, it is that he almost never tells the truth. How would you kill somebody on the word of someone you know is dishonest or even suspected?

Christianity has to be bigger than the United States, or it's invalid. You can fit your love of nation within that, but the American Empire and the kingdom that Jesus talked about are incompatible.

Hasn't it been interesting to hear the Vice President attack the Pope, and said the Pope should stick to the religion business? Remember when they used to say basketball players should just dribble and shut up? Entertainers should just sing and shut up? Is it Christianity if you take the justice out? Amazing! They say you stick to morals. Well, isn't murder a moral issue? And what you realize is that Christianity was trivialized, trivialized, and turned into almost a kind of etiquette in Europe, where you can murder, lie, steal, but as long as you do Christian-type things, then you're okay. Murder and then confess.

The list that Paul gives is not a call to morals, it's a call to ethics. And so, the second gift that Paul is giving us is if we're going to have a world we can share, then we have to get bigger than morals, and take up ethics. What do we owe every human being?

Now the final thing is one that I usually keep in my quiver when I'm debating these issues, because this is the ace card. This will destroy the idea of using Romans to attack people. The second chapter of Romans, that we will get to in a second, the second chapter of Romans begins with the word "therefore". Now think about that. Therefore. Can you really start a paragraph with "Therefore"?

The original Bible was not numbered. It wasn't divided in the way that it is now. This tells you that whoever divided Romans up did not follow the chain of thought or didn't want you to follow the chain of thought. You ready for this? If this passage has been used to hurt you, I hope when you see this, it will never hurt you again. Could we look at it?

### **Romans 2:1**

Therefore you are without excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others, for in passing judgement on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.

Therefore, this is the summation of the whole argument that he's been making. Therefore, you're without excuse, whoever you are, when you judge others. For in passing judgment on another, you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things.

Now, what some Christians do is say, "Well, yes, I murder, but at least I'm straight." For Paul, he was talking about a covenant, and if you broke any part of the covenant, the whole covenant's broken. And what he's trying to say is judgment will not heal the world. It's too broken for that. Every one of us would be disqualified, if perfect justice were called upon. Therefore, the judgments we have of each other are the problem. That is the division. That is the splinter in our eye that keeps us from seeing one another.

So, if you're a religious person, please stop thinking that anyone who disagrees with you is a sinner and a heretic. That is sin, according to Paul. And if you're not religious, please be more careful in making fun of people. At least define the term "religion." Because when you just think of religious people as stupid, you're not listening. Somebody may be speaking in a different sense than you know. They may be speaking symbolically. They may be speaking poetically. If we're going to build a bridge, we've all got to stop living in our judgments of one another. So, Paul says, whoever you are, you condemn yourself when you judge another.

Do you see any asterisks on that at all? Do not judge others, unless you're a Christian. No, it's all of us. We've all got to stop living in our judgments and start communicating, and that communication will begin the healing. Paul is saying that we have to move from judgments to grace, and grace is acting on the assumption that there's a tie that binds us together, no matter how obnoxious we seem to each other. That somehow what I'm doing to you I'm doing to myself, and somehow what you're doing to me you're doing to yourself. And Paul is begging us to build back, not the church, but the world, the whole world.

So, Paul was not perfect. He had a lot of flaws, and it's possible that he had some of the bigotries that we talk about. But if you're going to judge another person, you need a higher standard than that. The burden of proof is on you to show why this person is so dangerous that you have to disobey Christ.

Three things to remember whenever you run across this passage. First, is Paul was possibly talking about idolatry and a dying religion that was hurting people. To use that to any group of people today, I think Paul would say is a sin.

Second of all, look at the list that Paul is writing up. It's all about cruelty. If the essence of Christianity is love, then cruelty is the greatest heresy of all.

And then finally, when we realize none of us can really trust our judgments of each other, none of us are in a situation to see objectively the whole world. It's not through judgment that we change the world, but through grace. Operating on the assumption that there must be something good in there. There must be a heart in you that's like my heart, and vice versa.

The way Paul's trying to package it is we're all bozos on this bus. Original sin is saying let's start at the same level. None of us is in a position to look down on anyone else. It is grace, not judgment, that heals this world.

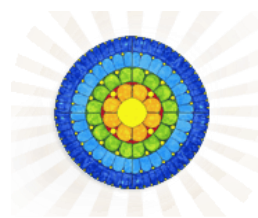
Well, that's my understanding of the text. We'll take a minute for you to think about how you would have preached it.

## Benediction

Rev. Erica Knisely

Love is patient and kind. It is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way but rejoices in the truth. May we receive that love in freedom and freely give it in return. May it be so. Amen.

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



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