



# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *Finding the Love in Paul*

### *“Getting Past Legalism”*

A St. Andrew’s Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
April 26, 2026

**Scripture Reading:** Galatians 5:16-26 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

*Let me put it this way: if you are guided by the Spirit, you will be in no danger of yielding to self-indulgence. Since our flesh is at odds with the Spirit—and the Spirit with our flesh—the two are so opposed that you cannot do whatever you feel like doing. If you are guided by the Spirit, you are not under the Law. It’s obvious what proceeds from the flesh: lewd conduct, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, hostility, arguments, jealousy, outbursts of anger, selfish rivalries, dissensions, factions, envy, drunkenness, orgies and so forth. I warn you as I have warned you before: those who do these sorts of things won’t inherit the kingdom of God! By contrast, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against these sorts of things there is no law! Those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh, with its passions and desires. So since we live by the Spirit, let us follow her lead. We must stop being conceited, contentious and envious.*

## Sermon

Some day, I’m going to preach on Sunday, and nothing’s going to happen on Saturday [laughter] to mess it up. We already had the scripture, we had that all kind of set, and then, um, as you may know if you check the news at all, there was an assassination attempt.

And I know a lot of people have mixed feelings, but it’s really, really important if we are going to be the healing agents of the world, to realize that violence is not going to get rid of the problem that we have.

I said last week, if violence could have gotten rid of racism, the Civil War would have worked. But if you look at the Bible Belt and the heart of the MAGA movement, it is the Confederacy. The America they want to get back to is the Confederate States of America, not the United States of America.

It's very important that even as we fight for justice, even as we protect each other from this fascistic movement, that we not do to them what they're doing to the rest of the world. Because we cannot stop the storm unless we step out of it. Incredibly important.

I went to a retreat that was a political group on organizing. Monday, well, Sunday I went down, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday. And all that time I would hear these stories of woundedness. There was a Latino man whose brother had served in the Marines, and as soon as his term was up, he was deported. There are people who grieve the bombing of another country.

There was a time in this country where war crimes were seen as something amiss, and you didn't bomb countries because a president didn't like them. And you didn't murder Venezuelans on open water because they're not Americans.

There's a saying that when little people cast giant shadows, you know the sun is setting on one world. The sun is setting on capitalism. The sun is setting on colonialism. The sun is setting on white supremacy, patriarchy, and a bunch of ancient evils.

And some people are so afraid they can't see into the future. They don't know what their role will be in a world that's fair. We need to be the visionaries that embody the traits that will bring that world about.

Christianity was born out of this kind of chaos. When they talk about the old world coming to an end, it's not the *Left Behind* stuff, it's not the Antichrist coming down. Well, that part may be true, but *[laughter]* it was the end of a cycle.

Rome, Persia, Greece: The age of the city-states was coming to an end, and people couldn't see what the future might look like. And so things like capitalism and communism developed as counterbalances to feudalism.

But a lot of water has gone under that bridge. And if we think in the ancient categories, we may not be able to respond to the new world that is being born.

Paul is trying to transform the category of how ethics is done. He's gonna talk about the difference between what he calls the works of the flesh, and the fruits of the Spirit. Now, what most people think Paul is about is impossible if we understand our text today.

Paul couldn't be homophobic and say laws of the flesh do not equal these qualities. He couldn't be in favor of patriarchy. His war against circumcision was not about a surgical procedure. He knew if Christianity was founded on circumcision that about half of the world would be left out. I can't explain that here; hopefully you'll be able to do that math. *[light laughter]*

Rules that govern the flesh are the problem, Paul is saying. Whether you're trying to indulge or oppose, it's very important to realize that when Paul uses the word *flesh*, he's not talking about the body. When he was talking about the body, he used the word *soma*. And at one point said the body is the temple.

But *sarx*, he's coming from a Stoic vocabulary here. The virtues that he's talking about are all Stoic virtues. They're much richer than the English words. But *Sarx* means the body that's detached from the character of the person. So it's not anger, it's bitterness.

Getting angry is a part of your human panoply of emotions. But you can get stuck in anger, and it becomes bitterness. How many people on your Facebook page are trolling and their sense of power comes from upsetting other people? How pathetic is that?

Desire is a very important and healthy experience of the body. But *sarx* means when you desire human beings so much that you don't see their humanity. They become an object for you, and you have tunnel vision. And if you can't win their affections, you don't think you can be happy. A lot of violence against women comes from that kind of desire.

How many times have you wanted to be happy in your life, and you looked externally? That you're gonna find something that would make you feel worthwhile. How many times did that work? It works for a while... I've always thought my hell would be getting all the wishes I made when I was a child and be stuck with them. *[laughter]*

The problem is we don't know what we want. We are beings in the midst of evolution. We're not finished. And that's our *fate*. We are transitional beings. When Christian pastors tell you that you can be frozen permanently in form in heaven and you'll be happy, they've given you a very dysfunctional view of the afterlife.

There's a sociobiologist named E.O. Wilson who was very important to me. I see some of y'all nodding, so I'm sure... He was into insects, and he looked at human beings. He wrote a book called *On Human Nature*. He looked at us like animals, which is what we are.

And he said at one point, the problem that human beings have is we have paleolithic instincts. Our instincts come from the Ice Age. We've adapted to an environment that isn't here anymore.

He said our institutions are medieval. Communism, capitalism, colonialism: Those come from another age. And we will not save ourselves by doubling down on any of those things. The MAGA movement is the worst possible response to the current crisis.

And he said we have godlike technology. AI. There're so many things now that are poor coping skills. They wouldn't be coping skills if we realized... They wouldn't be poor coping skills if we realized we need a simplified world.

We need a world that's based on nature, based on human rights. And you make your business decisions by what brings human happiness, not what makes the most money.

When Paul wrote this passage, it was a radical reformation of what ethics means. Rules of the flesh—do this, don't do that; eat this, don't eat that—only talks to the margins of who you are.

Your character. Character traits like patience. And for the Stoics, patience meant garnering your strength. Patience was you slowing down to win a race. Gentleness was strength in control, not triggered by external things. Very rich words.

And I'm stealing from Buddha here, but when your character is in tune with humankind, with the web of life, with the cosmic process, happiness follows you like your shadow. When your, what's called the soul, is out of tune, unhappiness follows you no matter how successful you are in what you do.

Now, words like *soul* are not Jewish. Most mystics believe that our ego, our sense of separateness, is an illusion. So the idea of making the ego permanent sounds really good at first, but if you take a moment to think about an evolving universe, that's gonna be a real problem.

Paul puts a list together of the virtues of character. If we focus more on our character than on our fate, we have much more leverage and control to be happy.

I don't think there's... Most people have learned the notion of the soul sort of like a ghost in the machine. A dualistic notion that you have a little ghost inside of you, and when you die, your body dies and then the little ghost gets up. *[light laughter]*

That's not the only view of what is happening in our world. Another is that human consciousness brings qualities to the world that the universe doesn't have before we get here. And this would be true of all sentient beings.

Color is not something that exists out in nature. It takes an observing eye. Music requires an ear. So to realize that you're birthing the qualities that are missing in this world; you don't find them, they're born through you.

And that's what a lot of the Christmas mythology is about. The sacred is born through us. It doesn't happen to us. You don't have to beg God to come into your life. It's already happening.

I've always looked at fireflies as a kind of analogy for the human condition. These are very ephemeral beings, but there's an energy that comes through them that seems eternal to me. I think that's our condition. There is some kind of light that comes through us.

Our own realm is very short, very ephemeral. But when we give ourselves to that energy, to that creativity, to that life, the miracle happens through us. In times like this, the people that have done that are probably your heroes.

When you think back to the people who have been a light to you in your life, they usually didn't have it that easy. But when a time like this came, when the sun was setting on the old and familiar. And the sun was rising on a world that nobody knew, that looked like chaos, that triggered fear. Those people who let that light shine through themselves became a guide for us all.

I think one of the most important stories I've ever heard in world religions is the calling of the Buddha. And I've mentioned it from time to time. A very short version of the story is he was raised by a ruler to be a ruler of the world. And at his birth, a prophet said he'll either be a world teacher or ruler, a king.

And the dad says, "We don't need a world teacher. I'm gonna protect him. I'm gonna keep him from seeing the suffering of the world and just surround him with luxury." So that works for a while, but then one day he goes out to the city with a mentor, and he sees somebody who's sick.

And he says to the mentor, "Could that happen to me?" And the mentor says, "That will happen to you." And then he sees a funeral. He sees a dead person. And he says, "Could that happen to me?" And the mentor says, "That will happen to you."

Well, the old game was over then. When you really think about the fact that every one of us here is going to die, spoiler alert, that radically changes what's important in your life. How many times have you said, "If anything ever happens to me?" *[laughter]* Guess what?

When you take that in deeply and profoundly, I mean, you see this all over the ancient world. Remember that you're going to die. Remember, you're going to die. Not as bad news! You're morphing into something else. The life in you is morphing into something else. That's who you are.

But what the Buddha story tells us is: You can't run from death. You can't run from that from which you're most afraid. What peace there is when you realize that. And you can't hold life still. There is no treasure that can be yours.

Everything belongs to time, so you can let it go. That's why Jesus said, "When you try to save your soul, you lose it." God, I wish the Church had heard that. Instead of trying to save everybody? From time? How's that working out?

I love the line, in *Braveheart*, where the hero says... He's threatened with death and he says, "Everyone dies, but not everyone truly lives." That is a spiritual message all around the world. You're like a firefly.

And the question isn't *if* you're going to die or even *when* you're going to die, but how much light are you going to shine? And that's the only thing that matters. That's the only thing you have any control of whatsoever.

To manifest the qualities of a true human being is not only the greatest gift you can give the world, but it's the happiest life you can possibly find.

When your character is out of tune with humankind, with the web of life, with the cosmic process, unhappiness follows you like your shadow. Footnote to the Buddha: When you are in tune, happiness follows you.

So, we live in a time when very, very small people cast very large shadows. You don't need to lose sleep over that. You don't need to hate people for being confused and lost. They're still your human family.

But you don't need to let confusion into your own heart. You don't have to let hatred and bitterness into your own heart. You don't have to, to let desire dehumanize the people of your life. You can be an example of what the new world is going to be.

You can be the firefly that in its brief, brief span shines this magnificent light. Everyone dies, but not everyone truly lives.

So you can't help it that hate has had the first word in our time. But you can make darn sure that it doesn't have the last word. Let's give love the last word.

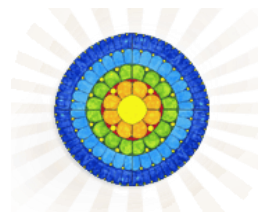
Well, thank you for your attention. We'll take a moment for you to consider how you would have preached these words.

## Benediction

### Rev. Carol Johnson

Let us go forth into the world through a door of hope for the future, remembering these words: Even if I knew that tomorrow everything would go to pieces, I would still plant an apple tree. You are the hands of hope, energized by the unconditional love of God, or whatever you call that great spirit. Amen.

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



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