



# LESSONS IN LIVING

## *Finding the Love in Paul*

### *“Part 7 - Whatever is True”*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
May 24, 2026

**Scripture Reading:** Philippians 4:8 (*The Inclusive Bible*)  
*Finally, my human family, whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.*

### Sermon

By the way, I didn't really remember Pentecost, but I thought I'd wear this (*indicating red handkerchief, then pocketing it*) to look like I did. (laughter) Don't let my hypocrisy take you out of the zone.

I had somebody stop by the church yesterday during the food pantry specifically to inform me that I'm a false preacher – this is not unusual, by the way– and that I was leading y'all astray and that y'all would be going to hell and it'd be my fault. And of course, first thought I have is, I'm wondering why your love's – because he's saying how much he loved me – how does your love feel so much like other people's hate? And when did Jesus die and leave you in the seat of judgment? Because when I read Jesus, all I see is him instructing us *not* to judge one another. So it's a little confusing.

The reason that we did this entire series on Paul, and that this is the last of the series on Paul, is that Paul's been misused historically so much to oppress people that I thought going through it and seeing the actual writings of Paul. Several books, in the Christian scriptures are not really by Paul. They're from the school of Paul, but they don't reflect the teachings of Paul. Whereas some people use Paul to say for women to be obedient to men, Paul was the one that said in Christ there's neither male nor female, Jew nor Greek, slave nor free. Paul was the one who said do not judge by the flesh. You judge by the fruits of the spirit, which are matters of character, not of biology. He worked very hard to help Christianity start out as a non-oppressive system.

Now, he was like every one of our ancestors. He was frail. He was a product of his time. We don't study the ancestors to copy them. We read them as a kind of root system from which to outgrow them. And unless I misunderstand Paul profoundly, I think the thing he would most want you to do is to outgrow him, to be deeper, more loving, wiser.

A huge part of the ministry that I'm trying to do, actually to the detriment sometimes of the sermons, is I want to think through what Christian worldview would mean after Darwin, after Einstein, after humanism, after we've learned about the human condition. What would need to change to keep from being oppressive? I think we can look at modern evangelical Christianity and see a pretty good example of how it can be oppressive and superstitious. But how do we need to change to be agents of the kind of kingdom that Jesus was talking about? This new relationship, new humanity, Paul called it.

If you read Romans, most people start and end with the first chapter and pick out the sins that they think are the worst and say that's what Paul was condemning. What we got to that they usually don't get to is the punchline starting in the second chapter, which says, therefore none of you has a right to judge anyone. The Book of Romans was trying to build a synthesis between Jewish Christians and pagan Christians. Because they were judging each other.

Now, I don't know about you, but to me, if a community can't get along with each other, we have no right to talk about justice elsewhere. If we can't love each other, I don't think we have the foundation from which to take a message out to the world, for the rest of the world.

Galatians is one of the most radical books in human history. It says that the letter of the law kills. Legalism is not Christian. Literalism is not Christian. He says, for freedom Christ has set you free. Is the Christianity you were taught a source of freedom for you or bondage? I think that's the challenge that happens to us when we read Paul.

Paul was Jewish at a time around the Mediterranean where people were longing for a universal form of religion. Not that everybody would have to comply to it, but that it would be harmonious with all forms of humanity.

There were Jews like Philo of Alexandria, Paul, Hillel, whose Judaism was universal. And I believe Jesus came from that line. I think Paul was aspiring to that line. Traditional Judaism says that loving with all of your heart, mind, and strength is the foundation. And they had a thing called the Shema, which you — they would write and put on their forehead. They'd put it on their sleeves: *Love God with all of your heart, mind, and strength*. And then Jesus added *neighbor*. But you also see that in Leviticus, of all places.

Religion is a kind of scaffold to get to full humanity.

So Paul is writing Philippians as the last letter he'll ever write. And this little passage that we're looking at, the little snippet, is one of the most moving places in scripture to me, because basically what he's saying is, I will never, I'll never be able to talk to you again. I'll never be able to teach again.

Here's the first slide.

### **“Finally”, “As to the rest”**

Usually it's translated “*finally*,” but basically in the Greek it's saying “*as to the rest*.” It's sort of an et cetera thing. I've tried to teach you everything I could, but as far as the rest, *whatever is good, whatever is true, whatever is beautiful, think on these things*. Does that sound like the Paul you were taught?

Whatever is true, whatever is just, whatever is beautiful is your heritage as a Christian. And if someone has enslaved you to dogma, you can't love with all of your mind. If someone's enslaved you to morality, you can't love with all of your strength. If someone has limited you to the Christian sect in terms of allegiances, you can't love with all of your heart.

So we're going to look at this little snippet today. I hope that instead of trying to understand a Bible verse, we'll try to understand our own lives. And instead of wasting any time on whether you agree or disagree with me, let the conversation lead you deeper into your own heart. What feels true and authentic in that place? The second slide,

### **“Whatever is true”: Aletheia (al-ee-THEE-uh) Literally,, to not forget Reality as opposed to opinion**

Whatever is true. Now, truth is a very strange word. In Hebrew, the word means something you can trust. The Greek culture thought ideas were where truth resided. So when you read the dialogues of Plato, you have Socrates, who — I love the dialogues of Plato, but they're crazy because they take definitions of words and just twist everything. Someone who thinks that the universe divides down into nouns and verbs, the nouns and verbs of human thought, has a pre-modern mind.

One of the discoveries of modern thought is the universe was here before we are, and we can't describe it literally. That's why in physics they use symbols. So you don't need to be embarrassed to use religious symbols. Because one of the quickest ways to go crazy is to think you understand God, that you have an image of God, that you can look at Scripture and understand exactly who God hates. That will never help the world.

So the word in Hebrew, *emet*, means something you can trust. It's like a peg on your wall and you can hang your coat on it. This word, *aletheia*, when you see a Greek word with an *a* in the front, often what that means is that it's called privative. It's the opposite. So ‘atheist’ is the opposite of a theist. An agnostic is the opposite of a Gnostic. It kind of inverts things. So you see right here, the second part of the word, *letheia*, means to forget. It can mean a trance. We get the word “lethargic” from it. And in ancient Greece, there were myths about a river that when you

died, you would go across this river and you drink the water, and it was the water of forgetfulness. So that when you reincarnated, you wouldn't remember what happened before.

So truth is the opposite of that. It's the opposite of trance. It's the opposite of forgetfulness. To me, it seems a whole lot closer to the word awareness than it does to belief. You can have very strong beliefs and be absolutely entranced. If love is the goal, then awareness is a much safer vessel.

In the mythology, there's also this Aletheia woman. She carried a mirror with her because in the ancient world there's objective truth and subjective truth, and you better know both, and you better know which one of them you're doing at the time. The mystery religions in particular, the motto they had was, when you open your inner eye, close your outer eye. When you open your outer eye, close your inner eye. Don't confuse subjective truth, intuitive truth, with objective truth, and then you're fine. We need both. If you've ever heard the words, the naked truth, I think where that comes from is, part of the mythology was, that she was bathing, Aletheia was bathing, and falsity came and stole her clothes. And instead of pretending that hadn't happened, she just went out naked. That's why I took the handkerchief out, because if I was going to preach on Aletheia, I shouldn't have a false thing there.

What mystics have always understood is that the universe is fundamentally ambiguous to human beings, which seems depressing, but so is the soil. If you learn the art of growing and gardening, that's actually a good thing. That means you don't have to just grow one kind of plant. The soil is ambiguous enough to grow sour lemons and sweet strawberries. It couldn't do that if it had a particular nature.

Whatever the symbol "God" is pointing to has to be ambiguous. It has to be transcendental. It can't be an object that we find. It has to be the source of what we find.

So what Paul is saying on his way out, he's leaving, he'll never be able to teach anybody else again, and he doesn't say, "I'm leaving, be sure to study the Apostles' Creed, take my writings, carry them with you." No, he says, *whatever is true, meditate on it, study it.*

And again, in Hebrew, the word means reality, not truth. Truth is something we say about words. Nobody says that a tree is true. Words are true or false. But what is real in your life? Paul is calling you to think about what is it that you can count on in life and what can't you. What is real and abiding, and what are you just projecting on the world? That will transform your spirituality profoundly. You cannot know if the teachings of Christianity are true. You can't. Resurrection, virgin birth, all that stuff. If it's not a symbol of something that's happening right now, you have no way of getting at it.

So the question isn't whether it's true, it's what reality does it put you in touch with that's happening right here, right now? So that's, that's the first thing that Paul says. Whatever's true, study that.

Then the next thing he says is *Whatever is just.*

**“Whatever is just or fair”:  
Dikaia (dee-KAH-yos)  
Can mean integrity or justice  
Often portrayed with mirror  
Naked truth**

Just to be sure, I looked up the pronunciation, and there were about six of them for this word. *Dikaia*. My problem is I'll mix Latin and Greek, so I don't ever try to speak. Usually it's translated “righteousness,” which is one of the most unhelpful words in the world. “Justice” is something we can measure. Are we being fair with one another? “Righteousness,” what does that even mean? We are cells in a common body. A cell that is not harmonized to the body is cancerous. A Christianity which is not synchronized to the whole is cancerous. And I think you can probably see that in the world today.

We need to be transformed to be agents that serve the whole. Martin Luther King Jr. said that the moral arc of the universe is slow, but it bends towards justice, said something like that. I've never really seen that in my life. I think there are lots of people who their turn never seems to come. But I still think his life, even with the tragedy, even with the failure, even the imperfections, demonstrates what this word means.

The universe, or at least the biological universe on this planet, has to work through evolution. So the idea of God controlling things like a mechanic would doesn't make sense. Our solutions have to grow organically. So can we be ambassadors for an age that we may not live long enough to see? I like Mr. Rogers' mother's statement where when he was in despair, she said, “*Look for the helpers.*” I think that's what Paul is saying. In times of injustice and oppression, stop focusing on the thuggery and look at the courageous people who refuse to kneel before the oppression. Let that feed your heart and you will begin to become this agent of a new world that's not necessarily possible in your own lifetime.

Whatever is fair, whatever is just, study that. Whatever brings out the best, your highest values, study that. Move that to the center of your life.

Then the final thing he says, in some ways it's the most important in our day. *Whatever is beautiful*. When we forget this one, we sink into despair. And we try to be just, we try to be truthful, and we just don't have the energy for it.

**“Whatever is beautiful”:  
Prospilia (pros-fee-lia)  
Adjective for Beautiful, worthy of love**

When everything else fails, look for something beautiful. Look for something that feeds your heart. I've told you before, when Buddha was trying to choose the person that would become the teacher after him. Remember, he just held up a flower and the disciple that was moved by the flower understood everything else.

We did a series on Vincent van Gogh, and his life was one of agony in so many ways. And I think a great part of his suffering came from the Church, the religion that he'd been taught, where he had a word like God, but it didn't point to the source of beauty. It was a critical parent judging from a distance. This is what he wrote to his brother.

He says,

*Sometimes, dear brother, I know so well what I want. I'm quite able to do without God, both in my life and in my painting. But what I cannot do without, unwell as I am, is something greater than myself, which is my life, the power to create.*

See, the power to create comes from something deeper, right? That's cosmic. The source of creativity is cosmic. So whoever taught him about God didn't understand that element. It was just a noun that somebody had taught them.

When you respond deeply and profoundly to beauty, it changes you from the inside. Emerson used to say that the stars are the daily bread of the soul. He used to say when you look at something beautiful and it moves you inside, you're seeing the handwriting of God. If you don't like the word "God," that's the least important part of the symbol. Whatever creative spark has brought you into being is also the creative spark that brought the oceans and the stars. What is it that connects those things together for you?

One of my favorite characters in terms of wisdom literature is Anne Frank, who lived at a horrible time. And if you've sunk in despair because of the nightmares we're going through, think of how much worse it was, and yet how beautiful her soul was, even at the last.

She wrote this,

*I see the world being slowly transformed into a wilderness. I hear the approaching thunder that one day will destroy us too. I feel the suffering of millions. And yet when I look up at the sky, I somehow feel that everything will change for the better, that this cruelty too will end, that peace and tranquility will return once more.*

What the great lovers of humankind have known through the centuries is that violence destroys itself. It seems invincible, but it always destroys itself. Do not despair. Hold on to hope. Turn from the ugliness to beauty, and you will create, through your loves, a new light for the world.

Paul is saying in times of ugliness and despair, turn your focus on that which is beautiful. And let that be the center of your world.

Like I say, this is, to me, one of the most powerful passages in Scripture where Paul is realizing he's not going to be there much longer. It's like when your parent takes your hand off the bicycle seat, you know, this is real now.

Paul had tried to talk, sometimes at very immature manipulative levels, but now he's saying the Shema in so many words. Don't forget to love with all of your heart, all of your mind, and all of

your strength. The universe is ambiguous. It's not what you want it to be. It is what we create it to be, through our heart, mind, and strength.

So he's saying in times of propaganda and lies, move truth to the center of your heart. In times of unfairness and injustice, move justice to the center of your heart. What does every human being deserve? How can you be the agent of that? And then finally, when it seems like the world has descended into madness and ugliness, move beauty to the center of your perception. And even in these horrible times, I think Paul is trying to tell us, you can still love with all of your heart, all of your mind, and all of your strength.

## Benediction

Rev. Erica Knisely

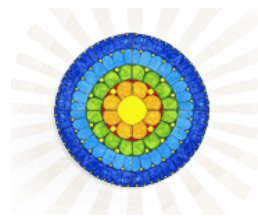
Beloved, may you remember who you are and remain awake to what is real and true.

May you move away from any sectarianism and embrace what is good for all.

Finally, may you seek what is beautiful and good all the days of your life.

In the name of the three loves: the love that brought you into life, the love that shows you the way to live, and the love that lives within you. Go in peace. Amen.

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



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