

Can a Religious Liberal Say Anything Good about the Apostle Paul?

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Readings: Greatest Hits of the Apostle Paul

Reader 1: Today's readings are from the Greatest Hits of the Apostle Paul. About 30 years after the death of Jesus, Paul wrote a series of letters to some of the fellowships that he founded or supported in various cities of the Roman Empire. The first reading is from his letter to the churches in Galatia.

Before faith came, we were held in custody under the law, being kept as prisoners until the coming faith would be revealed. Thus the law had become our guardian until Christ, so that we could be declared righteous by faith. But now that faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian. For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God through faith. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female—for all of you are *one* in Christ Jesus.

Reader 2: This reading comes from a letter to the church in Rome. As they fear and suffer persecution, Paul urges them to keep their faith in God's protection and care.

. . . Who will separate us from the love of Christ? Will trouble, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? No, in all these things we have complete victory through him who loved us!

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things that are present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in creation will be able to separate us from the love of God. . . ."

Reader 1: In this well-known passage from Paul's first letter to the members of the church in Corinth, he urges them to strive for unconditional love in their relationships with one another.

Now I will show you a way beyond comparison. If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but I do not have love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophecy, and know all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith so that I can remove mountains, but do not have love, I am nothing. If I give away everything I own, and if I give over my body in order to boast, but do not have love, I receive no benefit.

Love is patient, love is kind, it is not envious. Love does not brag, it is not puffed up. It is not rude, it is not self-serving, it is not easily angered, or resentful. It is not glad about injustice, but rejoices in the truth.

It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. But if there are prophecies, they will be set aside; if there are tongues, they will cease; if there is knowledge, it will be set aside. For we know in part, and we prophesy in part, but when what is perfect comes, the partial will be set aside.

When I was a child, I talked like a child, I thought like a child, I reasoned like a child. But when I became an adult, I set aside childish ways. For now we see in a mirror indirectly, but then we will see face to face. Now I know in part, then I will know fully, just as I have been fully known. And now these three remain: faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love.

Sermon by Roger Jones

I wonder if any of you can identify with what I have to say to you.

I know the right thing to do, but I cannot always do it. I do not do the good that I want to do. I do the wrong thing. I do the thing I *don't* want to do.

Can anybody identify?

I know the right thing to do, but I cannot always do it. *I do not do* the good that I want to do. I do the *wrong thing*. I do the thing I don't want to do.

Can somebody say amen? Yes, that's right.

I *know* the right thing to do, but I cannot always do it. I do not do the good that I want to do. I do the wrong thing. I do the *thing I don't want to do*. Amen? Amen!

These words are a paraphrase of words in a letter Paul wrote to a group of fellow-believers in Rome. He had brought this group of people to the belief that Jesus was the Messiah. He had brought this group, and groups all over the Roman Empire, to the belief that Jesus was risen from the dead, and that Jesus would return soon.

Paul was the first theologian of Christianity. To be more specific, he was the first theologian of Christianity whose thoughts survived on written documents.

More words in the Christian New Testament come from Paul's hand than from Jesus' lips. Paul's letters are the earliest documents in the New Testament. His letters are at least a decade older than the first book of Gospel narratives, the Gospel of Mark. Modern scholars of religion agree that seven surviving letters came from Paul's own hand.¹ Yet the Holy Bible

contains other letters written under the *name* of Paul. New Testament scholars in liberal seminaries and university-based departments of religion dispute whether Paul wrote those, and whether some lines may have been inserted by someone else into some of the letters Paul had written. In the ancient world, it was a convention to write letters under the name of famous figures from history. Modern scholars think that the letters which Paul did not write were composed after his death.

Other information about Paul comes from stories in the Acts of the Apostles. Many stories were written about Paul and the other apostlesⁱⁱ, but only the Acts of the Apostles became part of the official, canonical Holy Bible. But there are points at which the story in Acts and the letters of Paul do not agree.ⁱⁱⁱ

For example, the Acts of the Apostles depicts Paul having a conversion experience on the road to Damascus, but Paul's letters don't mention it. Paul did mention his imprisonment, and having been shipwrecked three times, but not that God stopped him on the road to Damascus. The author of Acts wanted to depict the early followers of the risen Christ as leaders of a unified movement and a new religion. Yet, the first Christians did not have a unified identity. As the historian A. N. Wilson points out, there was nothing so distinct as Christianity for Paul to be converted to. Paul was one of the inventors of Christianity, one of its innovators.

Paul was the first theologian, the most prominent, and the most controversial one. Paul has been used as a weapon by some Christians against other people, and he's been a source of liberation to others.

Who was this theologian? First of all, Paul was a Jew; he was always Jewish. And he was a citizen of the Roman Empire. He likely was born in a port city in Asia Minor, now Turkey. He was a member of the commercial class, and a traveler. He was a man who could write and speak the Greek language. He was the only apostle who had not known Jesus as a living person. Unlike the other apostles, Paul had not been a disciple of Jesus. Moreover, Paul said, at first he had persecuted those who believed that Jesus was the risen Messiah. For this, Paul wrote: "I am unworthy to be an apostle," (1 Cor 15:9), but he thanked God for making him one. Somehow, God had changed Paul's heart.

Paul was a tentmaker, a man who tanned animal skins. In those days, the primary customers of tents were the military legions of the Roman Empire. This means that Paul depended on the Empire for business. Unlike Jesus and his crowd, Paul was neither a peasant nor a rebel. A.

N. Wilson speculates that Paul worked as a temple guard for the priestly class of Jews, known as the Sadducees.^{iv} Like Paul, the priests also were dependent on the favor of the Empire. The priests likely did not welcome Jewish rabble rousers like Jesus and his crowd. If Paul was a pal to the privileged, this might be why he persecuted followers of Jesus.

The Roman punishment for troublemakers was crucifixion.^v Crucifixion was one of many methods for terrorizing the populations over which the Romans ruled, including the Jewish population. Traveling in and out of Jerusalem as Paul did, he would have seen lots of "killing fields,"^{vi} with people hanging for days till they died of asphyxiation, as the vultures circled round. Somehow, Paul came to learn about and believe that Jesus was the messiah promised in the Scriptures of Judaism. As he came to believe this, Paul would have been traumatized to think how Jesus had been killed.

Hence, Paul was obsessed with the death of Jesus on the cross and with the resurrection. Paul's writing immortalized the paradox at the heart of Christian theology. The paradox is this: the Jews had expected the Messiah to come as a warrior, but Jesus came as a peasant and died as a victim. In Paul's words, it was through his death that Christ achieved glory. Through weakness, he became strong. It seems understandable to me that the message of strength in weakness would capture the heart of many people living under the thumb of the Empire. Furthermore, this message motivated Paul's preaching against violence and vengeance. In his letter to the Romans, Paul said, "Do not repay anyone evil for evil"; he said, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." (Rom 12:17, 21)^{vii}.

Paul has a reputation as a scold, a rule-maker, an uptight killjoy. Yet his message was that the Messiah had freed people from being held in captivity to religious laws. He was not a list-maker. He did not concern himself with accusing his friends of wrongdoing. Indeed, he condemned the hypocrisy of judging others: To the Roman fellowship Paul wrote, "In passing judgment on another you condemn yourself, because you, the judge, are doing the very same things" (Rom 2:1).

In the First Letter to the Thessalonians, Paul wrote: "Prove all things; hold fast to that which is good" (1 Thess 5:21). In other words, he said, verify all things. Keep those things you know in your heart to be good. Paul did not say, give me blind obedience. He did not say, here's your rules. Instead, Paul focused on helping his far-flung churches keep their internal unity and keep their faith in Christ's return. Of course, when his friends encountered views contrary to his own, he did try to sway them through argument.

But he also granted them the ability to make up their own their minds. “Verify all things. Hold fast to that which is good.”

Paul did not so much worry about specific sins as he bewailed the human condition of sinfulness. For Paul, sin meant sinfulness, a state of being, the state of not being able to do always what you know is right, and not being able always to keep from doing what is wrong. To Paul, Christ had brought salvation from the human condition of sinfulness. Paul *does* condemn Pagan worship practices, unfortunately. As a Jew, Paul was an uncompromising monotheist. He was no doubt repelled by the idol-worship he had seen, by the drinking of bull’s blood, and by temple prostitution.

And, of course, Paul is not without his ego. He calls himself the least of the apostles, but he also says: “I worked harder than *all* of them.” Then, realizing how this comes across, he says, “It wasn’t I who did [all the work], but the grace of God with me” (1 Cor 15:11).

Paul is famously known as a sexist, or worse. The letter to the Hebrews says that women should keep silent in church. That letter is from the first century—old stuff. But only a decade ago, the Southern Baptist Convention voted to affirm that wives should submit to their husbands graciously. This is troubling when you realize that the Southern Baptists are the largest Protestant denomination in America.

And listen to the letter to the Ephesians: “Wives, be subject to your husbands as you are to the Lord. For the husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the church” (Eph 5:22-23). Ugh! Well, I have good news for you. Thanks to modern scholarship, there is evidence that Paul was not the author of the Ephesians letter or the Hebrews letter. You can find even more words against women in the letters to Timothy and Titus. Thanks to modern scholarship, we know that these letters were not written by Paul either. Indeed, as the scholar J. Paul Sampley notes, none of the letters that are without dispute by the hand of Paul call for the subjection of wives^{viii}, only the letters of disputed authorship. The anti-woman letters came later, by other hands, writing in his name.

First Corinthians does have a passage against women speaking in church, yet the same letter says that women should cover their heads before they speak, or prophesy, in front of the church. He wouldn’t add this detail if he didn’t want them to say anything.

This is good news for those of us who accept modern scholarship, but lots of Bible readers think Paul said everything attributed to him. Arguing with people who think this, arguing with Biblical literalists about what Paul did or did

not say, is a recipe for frustration. I don’t recommend it.

However, if Paul really did write those words against women, then he contradicted himself. For elsewhere in his writing, Paul made the case for gender equality! Writing to the Galatians, Paul said that in Christ, “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female—for all of you are *one* in Christ” (Gal 3:28) If there is neither male nor female in Christ, why should humans give one gender power over the other? I know Christians who are feminists; I know Christian who are gay. Their Christian faith comes in part from Paul’s message that the resurrection has ended all human divisions and categories.

In the First Letter to the Corinthians, Paul did say that he wished that those who were unmarried would stay unmarried, like him. He said: “It is better to marry than to be aflame with passion” (1 Cor 7:9). Because not everybody had enough self-control, it was better to get married than to get yourself into trouble. Yet Paul also wrote that *both* the husband and the wife have authority over *each other’s* body. The man and the woman each have a right to sexual relations. *Neither one of you should deprive one another of sex*, he wrote, *unless* you have a mutual “agreement for a set time [of abstinence], to devote yourselves to prayer.” *But don’t wait too long*, he said! (1 Cor 7:5).

Paul believed that the world was coming to an end—soon—in his lifetime!^{ix} This is why Paul advised his friends to stay single if they weren’t already married. This is why he advised them not to rebel against the political structure in which they lived. He said, “The *powers that be* are ordained by God” because he believed that God was in ultimate control. The return of Jesus was imminent; the Messiah would rule the world and set right all the things that were wrong. Jesus would come back to save the world and bring the faithful to God. Paul was giving his church *short-term advice, not a blueprint for all time*. Soon it wouldn’t matter whether one was married or not, whether one was slave or free, whether one was subject to an unfair government.

If Paul wasn’t writing a blueprint for 2,000 years of Christian civilization, then what are modern people to make of the letters he wrote, even if we ignore the letters by anonymous others? Waiting for the end of the world, Paul did not advocate political change. Yet he advocated spiritual change. He preached the practice of spiritual non-conformity. He wrote: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God” (Rom 12:2) Don’t trust

the ways of the world; free your mind! Verify all things! Keep what's good!

Paul believed in the radical equality of people without regard to gender or station. In a world where harshness and cruelty reigned, Paul promoted non-violence. He argued for love and unity in human relations. He argued for non-conformity as a spiritual practice. He believed that that human power and control were illusions, that good was stronger than evil, that love was stronger than death. For Paul, what made these things real was the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Christ showed that even though sin ruled the world, God had the last word. And the last word ...was that we are loved.

Paul preached that God's will was greater than human fallibility. Paul preached that "where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom 5:20). Paul preached that in the eyes of God, human disagreements and human social categories were false. He preached that all human divisions were overcome by the love of God.

Paul said: I know the right thing to do, but I cannot always do it. I do not do the good that I want to do. I do the wrong thing. I do the thing I don't want to do. Yet, he said, *God still loves me. And if God can love somebody like me, God can love anybody. If I still have worth, then so do you.* These words are my paraphrasing, but I think they are his message.

This is how I would translate Paul's message: Nothing can separate us from the power that brought us into life and called us into being. Nothing can separate us from the power of love in the universe. Nothing can separate us from the love that is ours. Nothing can separate us from love. So may it be. Amen.

BENEDICITON

Keep alert, stand firm in your faith; be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love. (1 Cor 16)

ⁱ J. Paul Sampley. Introduction to the Letter of Paul to the Ephesians. *The New HarperCollins Study Bible*. New York, 19___. P. 2192. The authentic letters are those to the Romans, Galatians, and Philippians, one of two letters to the Thessalonians (the first), and both of the letters to the Corinthians. In addition, Paul wrote to a man named Philemon, asking him to free an escaped servant named Onesimus, who was indentured to Philemon

ⁱⁱ For example, scholars have translated manuscripts entitled *The Acts of Paul*, and *The Acts of Paul and Thecla*. *The Acts of the Apostles*

was written by the author of the Gospel of Luke, and it was made part of the standard New Testament in the second century of the common era, when the church was young.

ⁱⁱⁱ A. N. Wilson. *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle*. London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1997. P. 67.

^{iv} As a temple guard Paul would have found himself close to a handy supply of lamb skins, from the thousands of lambs that devout Jews brought to the priests for sacrifice.

^v This is why it is arguable that Jesus was executed for political sedition, not for heresy, as some anti-Jewish Christians like to say. The Jewish penalty prescribed for heresy was to crush someone under a stone.

^{vi} A. N. Wilson. *Paul: The Mind of the Apostle*. London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1997. P. 59.

^{vii} Living under the oppression of the Roman Empire, the Jews had awaited the coming of a Messiah to rescue them and establish a world order of righteousness. They waited for a political messiah, a rescuer anointed by God. The Jewish followers of Jesus came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. Paul went one step further. He turned Jesus from a political messiah into a spiritual messiah. He taught non-Jews that they could follow Jesus Christ too, without having to become Jewish first.^{viii} Jesus was the savior of everybody, he said, and not just the Jews. Both the Acts of the Apostles and the letters of Paul tell us that Paul's mission was to give the good news to the Gentiles, while Peter and other apostles. By doing this, Paul gave not just Jesus to the Western world; he gave the Jewish heritage of Jesus as well. When the western world became Christian, it inherited the Jewish Bible, with its great stories, its ethical commandments, and its moral laws. Paul grafted Judaism onto the western world.

^{viii} Sampley, note to Ephesians 5:24, p. 2199.

^{ix} "We who are alive . . . will be caught up in the clouds . . . to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord forever" (1 Thess 4:16-17).