It is a common—and fundamental—misconception that Paul told people how to live. Apart from forbidding certain abusive practices, he never gives any precise instructions for living. It would have violated his two main social principles: human freedom and dignity, and the need for people to love one another.

Paul was a Hellenistic Jew, originally named Saul, from the tribe of Benjamin, who made a living from tent making or leatherworking. He called himself the “Apostle to the Gentiles” and was the most important of the early Christian evangelists.

Paul is not easy to understand. The Greeks and Romans themselves probably misunderstood him or skimmed the surface of his arguments when he used terms such as “law” (referring to the complex system of Jewish religious law in which he himself was trained). But they did share a language—Greek—and a cosmopolitan urban culture, that of the Roman Empire. Paul considered evangelizing the Greeks and Romans to be his special mission.

“For you were called to freedom, brothers and sisters; only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves to one another. For the whole law is summed up in a single commandment, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”
The idea of love as the only rule was current among Jewish thinkers of his time, but the idea of freedom being available to anyone was revolutionary.

Paul, regarded by Christians as the greatest interpreter of Jesus’ mission, was the first person to explain how Christ’s life and death fit into the larger scheme of salvation, from the creation of Adam to the end of time. Preaching spiritual equality and God’s infinite love, he crusaded for the Jewish Messiah to be accepted as the friend and deliverer of all humankind.

In Paul Among the People, Sarah Ruden explores the meanings of his words and shows how they might have affected readers in his own time and culture. She describes as well how his writings represented the new church as an alternative to old ways of thinking, feeling, and living.

Ruden translates passages from ancient Greek and Roman literature, from Aristophanes to Seneca, setting them beside famous and controversial passages of Paul and their key modern interpretations. She writes about Augustine; about George Bernard Shaw’s misguided notion of Paul as “the eternal enemy of Women”; and about the misuse of Paul in the English Puritan Richard Baxter’s strictures against “flesh-pleasing.” Ruden makes clear that Paul’s ethics, in contrast to later distortions, were humane, open, and responsible.

Paul Among the People is a remarkable work of scholarship, synthesis, and understanding; a revelation of the founder of Christianity.

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of Paul as sexist homophobe, and does so by showing how really bad the pagan world was in his day.

Regarding Paul’s often-quoted words about homosexuals, Ruden unveils for us a world where slave boys were regularly used (and mostly abused) for sex, where families with money sent a slave along with their sons to school in the hope the sons would not be accosted by a man trying to procure them as sex toys. Ruden, deeply familiar with Greek and Roman literature, makes it clear that the world of Paul’s day was not some delightful 1960s sexual paradise love-in, but a world full of disgusting exploitation, in which both women and boys were objectified, regarded as low as animals. Where I find some fault in her fascinating chapter on Paul and homosexuality is that she rather coyly limits herself to pedophilia and tiptoes around the matter of adult males having sex (obviously that did go on in Paul’s day). We can appreciate her detail—horrible as it is—about the abuse of boys by adult men, but the book could have been much more interesting had she included data on adult male practices.

Her chapter on Paul and his view of women is superb. Suffice it to say that modern women should be very happy to live in this world instead of Paul’s, for the quotations from pagan literature make one wonder if women were truly loved or valued as human beings in that period. She quotes from the Iliad—what a shame most people are no longer familiar with it!—a passage in which Zeus, about to bed his wife Hera, tells her how beautiful she is at that moment—then compares her to the various mortal women he deflowered and impregnated. Ruden observes that our society (or at least the men in it) may still applaud the bed-hopping male, but we would be horrified to hear him make a speech such as Zeus did. The shame that we attach to the male adulterer is, Ruden proves, largely due to Paul and his amazingly enlightened view of marriage, in which fidelity is expected of both spouses. Paul the woman-hater is revealed to be Paul the woman-liberator.

Rudens chapter on Paul and his famous passage about being obedient to the government is interesting but not enlightening. She has a lot of fascinating info about the military nature of the Greeks and Romans and how the state was seen as an extension of the army, but she frankly lost me in this chapter. Perhaps it will stand up better in a later reading. Her chapter on slavery, on the other hand, is superb, as she responds to that age-old question: Why didn’t Paul (and the other New Testament writers) condemn slavery outright? Her answer, in brief: they set up a new moral community in which it would inevitably die out. Many of the early Christians were slaves, and Paul and other Christian leaders made it clear that in God’s eyes, slaves were as valuable as anyone else. This was far removed from the pagan view, where slaves were not even regarded as humans.

I read this book shortly after re-reading the Book of Acts in the Bible, in which Paul is the important figure. Rudens book was a nice companion to Acts, providing information on the pagan environment which the original
readers of Acts would have possessed (since it was the environment they lived in). Both her book and Acts remind us that the beautiful statues and temples we associate with ancient Greeks and Romans were only part of the picture, that theirs was a violent, exploitive, slave-based society where most peoples lives were frankly horrible. She makes the case that Christianity, far from seeming restrictive or Puritanical, seemed like the very thing to liberate people from a morally rotten culture.

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