



## LESSONS IN LIVING

### *Series: Self Defense from a Fundamentalist Attack Part 1: Literalism*

A St. Andrew's Sermon  
Delivered by Dr. Jim Rigby  
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Scripture Reference: Galatians 4:21-5:1 (*The Inclusive Bible*)

I had a strange dream last night. I dreamed that across town there was some kind of a service at church which looks at things a little differently than we do here. I was kind of feeling like I was on shaky ground in terms of my being welcome there. It was a strange dream in a lot of ways but one of the ways was I looked down and I was wearing my Genevan Gown - my preacher's robe - which I haven't worn in probably 20 years, and the thought flashed in my head, "Well, I hope nobody from St Andrew's is here to see this" (*congregation laughs*)...which shows you how much integrity I have in my dreams. But I am sitting there and I recognize classmates from seminary; I recognize family members; you know how dreams are. So I am going through the service and my part is to read the love passage from Paul. But I've forgotten said passage, so I get up to do the reading and I realize I don't have the paper; (I'm not as organized in the dream as I am in person...*laughter*). So I start looking up the passage in the bible and somebody from the congregation stands up and either starts talking about the King James Version or reading from King James, and I find the passage and I start reading; we are kind of doing the "dueling banjos" kind of thing there. Then, a fistfight breaks out as we are reading the love passage (*laughter*). And as a good pastor, the last thing I remember in the dream is I am trying to say we all have tension when we read these kinds of things and we try to put a big bow on the whole thing...which didn't work. Preachers have a certain type of tension dreams, and really, everybody has those tension types of dreams. It used to be when I was getting ready to preach, I couldn't find my Gown, and I couldn't find my sermon and this sort of thing. Now that I don't use the Gown, its usually not having the sermon or something like that. But I think the reason I was feeling the tension dream is because of this new series on Fundamentalism.

When I first came to St. Andrew's Church there were a lot of fundamentalists in the congregation. It was quite an education for me, because when I would preach a sermon - like today - saying that the Bible is not literally true, what would happen then after church was that people would be crying. It is one thing trying to deal with fundamentalism if you've got some

caricature - you've got these mean people that are trying to bully everybody - but these people were just simply afraid and hurt by what I had said. That's a little harder to distance, and I realized not to think in terms of "us and them" when it comes to fundamentalism. So throughout this sermon series, one of the things that I am going to be saying over and over again is *when we talk about fundamentalism we're not talking about fundamentalists*. Because the fact is we all come in and out of that mental state where we want it to be about our group, where we want things to be literal, in black and white, where we want to know what the "pecking order" is. That's human nature to anybody that gets afraid, and we can disguise that fundamentalism in thousands of different ways. One of the ways to do it is to make scapegoats out of fundamentalists. So what I am going to try to do in this series is to look at fundamentalism as a thought system, as a kind of a mood that arises at certain times.

The first time people called themselves "fundamentalists" was around 1869. Princeton University came up with what they considered to be the *Fundamentals of the Faith*. And you probably can guess what they are: the Atonement, Virgin Birth, Scripture is literal and inerrant, and it went through a list of five fundamentals and so the name stuck. So, on the one hand, Fundamentalism is the name of that particular movement in America, but in another sense it is, again, what everybody does. When we get frustrated, when we get frightened, we want to know who's in and who's out of the group. Whether you call that Fundamentalism or not, that's what I am talking about today. We want to make clear; we want to have definitions; we don't want to have any kind of ambiguity. We want to know the pecking order. That's what we will be talking about today. That's what Paul is addressing in the letter to the Galatians.

This was a young church that had shifted over to a religion of love and grace. But then some people came in and shamed them and embarrassed them, and said, "You're not obeying the rules." The food laws, circumcision, these kinds of things, the Commandments, the laws of scripture are things that you have to obey to be a really religious person. So the people left the covenant of grace. Whenever you hear "Falling from Grace", that doesn't mean making a mistake; In Paul's sense it means leaving the covenant of grace and trusting in works, trusting that you can *make yourself right*. So Paul is going to write and try to dissuade people. We are not questioning anybody's motives as we say this. We can have very good motives when we start getting afraid. The problem with fundamentalism, the problem with literalism, is that it excludes people. For instance, when you say marriage is between one man and one woman, there are people who don't fit in that definition. That may give you a clear world, but you are dissecting the human family. When you say the world was created in seven days, that may give a very clear linguistic picture of how the world began, but you have to leave the world of experimental science to stay on that path.

So you can probably make you own list of the people that are targeted when we do the work of fundamentalism. Paul is writing to the targets. Through history, literalism has led to inquisitions, to crusades, and the truth is we are all capable of that. Very kind, very nice people are capable of circling the wagons, ejecting anybody who doesn't fit the definition of the group, and reduce the world to language. Sometimes, that's what we want to do so badly. We want the world to be like our ideas of the world and we can make our ideas of the world very clear, but reality doesn't cooperate very well. So Paul is writing a letter.

I remember when I first started doing ministry. I had never seen the Bible used as a power tool before. What would often happen is this: when it looks like a relationship is breaking up, two people are going to get a divorce, the husband, who has never shown up in church before shows up with a floppy Bible under the arm, and he has read one verse—guess what it is—“wives obey your husbands” (*laughter*). The rest of it is pretty much unopened, but he remembered that there was something in the Bible that could be a useful crowbar in the situation. In my years of ministry, I’ve never seen anyone take it literally when it says, “Do not charge interest” (*laughter*), not one. I’ve never known anyone who took it literally when it says, “Sell everything you have and give to the poor.” Everybody can do some really symbolic work with those passages. I’ve never known anybody who really fought with biblical weapons - the Bible says to go to war with bows and arrows. I’ve never heard anybody argue that the army is being unbiblical. Most specifically, we become literal for *other people* when we are trying to hold our lives together, and other people don’t fit our definition and we’re afraid.

Galatians is a textbook dismantling Fundamentalism. It talks about legalism as a mistake; it talks about literalism as a mistake; it talks about sectarianism as a mistake; and certainly scapegoating as a mistake. We will look at each one of those as we go through this month.

Paul writes to this young church that is being shamed by some traditionalists, and he says for those of you who want to submit to the law, (the passage is written in your bulletin, so if you think I’m making stuff up, please look it up)...those of you who want to submit to the law...see, what Paul is going to say is whether you submit to flesh for pleasure or submit to the flesh in terms of rules of the flesh, that’s not the spirit. So things like rules of circumcision, what to touch, what to eat - all these things he saw as physical and not spiritual. That passage that he’s going to quote talks about the woman who can’t have children actually being more fruitful than someone who can; it’s realizing that your real worth as a human being does not come from other people’s approval, not even the church’s, maybe even especially not the church. Paul is saying you have to feel accepted and loved as you are to begin this journey.

So he chooses a story that is going to rub people the wrong way. People talk about biblical marriage all the time. Have you ever heard anybody talking that way who mentions the multiple partners in the stories? Abraham has two wives here. That doesn’t really fit into most people’s simplified version of things. And even worse, there was this story of when you can’t get your wife pregnant, the maid’s close enough. What we have to realize about the ethics in the Bible is that they were trying to *reproduce* anyway they possibly could. The reason homosexuality was seen as wrong; the reason birth control was seen as wrong, is that neither of these didn’t make enough babies. Surely we can see that going back to that time of impregnating anything that can’t run very quickly (*laughter*) is not the ethics we need now. Got plenty, plenty of people on the planet. We need to go deeper, need to go spiritual, and see people apart from gender, from status, and all of those things. That’s where Paul is going to lead in a very, very careful argument.

(Did I go too far? (*laughter*) What’s that? I am sure they’ll censor the tapes) (*laughter*). Here’s my point. Paul tells that outrageous story and then says something you’d never guess Paul would ever say. He tells the story of Abraham, Sarah, and Hagar, I say “Haygar” cause I’m from Texas, (*laughter*) Ishmael, Isaac, and he says, **“This is an allegory”**.

Don't let that moment slip by you. This is Paul, and he's in the Bible, and he's reading a part of the Bible that is presented as history from the literalistic point of view, and he says *this is an allegory, a symbol, a metaphor, a parable, an illustration of deeper spiritual principles*. And he takes it in a way that no orthodox person is going to enjoy; he's going to say that Mt. Sinai, where the Ten Commandments came from, is the hill of slavery. Now that can't go very good, right? But he's saying that the point is to get to the spiritual, the New Jerusalem which frees us. The punch line for Paul is: *for freedom, Christ has set you free*. Do not submit to the religion of slavery. Again, if you don't think that; if you think I am making things up, please look at Galatians. It's one of the most amazing five pages anywhere in the history of the world in terms of it's really looking and analyzing how we become Fundamentalists and how we can dismantle our own fundamentalism.

Paul uses a little "decoder" that we've used here before. When you look at scripture, you ask the question, "how is this talking to me?" Paul says it isn't really about *those* people, it's about *you*, and it is about *here*, and about *now*. You are the children of freedom. You are the ones God is trying to free and call out of captivity. You are the blessed, chosen ones that God wants to use. It's about you; it's about here and now, and it's always about love, an understanding of love at a deeper level in a way that you might not guess yourself.

I think the stress dream I had was not about you getting mad at me for doing the sermon, but for us making a caricature of very sincere people. For us to make a caricature of Fundamentalists in our efforts to understand fundamentalism, we all can circle the wagons; we all can try to make things simple; we all can try to find a safe place in the pecking order. Paul is simply trying to call us to something beyond that.

If you've been targeted by a fundamentalist, if you don't fit into somebody's definition, Paul is trying to heal you, trying to help you find your worth, but he is also trying to do it in a way where somebody else doesn't become the target. So the very first Fundamentalist any one of us needs to deal with is the one in the mirror that we see every morning. If we purge the literalism, the legalism from our own hearts then we move closer to this calling to freedom. Paul's punch line for this passage is the ending of this sermon: "For freedom Christ has set you free. Do not submit again to the religion of slavery."

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