



# *New Life Riders*

*Motorcyclists Serving God and Community*

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Dear Friends,

This week we celebrate the 249<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of our nation and the signing of the Declaration of Independence. In the midst of the cookouts and fireworks, the pool parties and parades, is the reminder that our nation was founded on freedom – the freedom to speak, think, worship, and act without hindrance or restraint. Recognition that freedom for many is at risk right now, this is something that requires study, prayer, reflection and action.

In his State of the Union address on January 6, 1941, then President Franklin Delano Roosevelt outlined a vision of four fundamental freedoms. He described them in this way:

- *The first is freedom of speech and expression—everywhere in the world.*
- *The second is freedom of every person to worship God in his [or her] own way—everywhere in the world.*
- *The third is freedom from want—which, translated into world terms, means economic understandings that secure to every nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants—everywhere in the world.*
- *The fourth is freedom from fear, which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor—anywhere in the world.*

*That is no vision of a distant millennium. It is a definite basis for a kind of world attainable in our own time and generation.*

These words were spoken during World War 2, and though the United States had not yet entered the war, this vision of President Roosevelt recognized its inevitability and the US's role in ensuring these fundamental freedoms for all, "everywhere in the world."

Our nation is once again at a critical juncture in standing for these fundamental freedoms for all people. Understanding what freedom is – and what it isn't – is important. Paul's letter to the Galatians provides us with some principles of freedom as followers of Jesus.

The Galatians were arguing about the law, specifically the Mosaic law, and how it did – or did not – apply to their life together as followers of Christ. The people had many practical and pressing questions and Paul addresses them throughout his whole letter. Paul references the idea of freedom in Christ, and the gift that that freedom gives to the church to live out their faith. In Chapter 5 specifically, Paul gives an even more detailed description, and it serves as a powerful definition of freedom.

For Paul, freedom is less about freedom **FROM** something, and more about a call **TO** or **FOR** something else. He is quick to point out that the freedom won for believers in Christ is not a license to do whatever we please. Rather, it is something that brings us together. The call to freedom is a call to love. And the word for love that Paul uses is **agape**. Agape love goes far beyond what the law demands. Agape love is an all-encompassing way of life that is constantly seeking to serve others. Agape love is pure and self-less. It embraces a universal, unconditional love that transcends and persists regardless of circumstance. Agape love is the highest form of love that reflects the love God shown through Jesus.

I am certain that Paul chose this word – **agape love** – intentionally. In the midst of the bickering and the power struggles in the church in Galatia, Paul needed to do more than just call on the people to say they were sorry and play nicely with one another. He could have used the word **philia** for that, representing the "brotherly love" of getting along. Instead, Paul doesn't pull any punches. He calls the people out for their behavior toward

each other, reminding them of the exceedingly high calling they have to each other as Christians. He is pointing them, and us, to the biggest picture possible about what it means to not simply live together in coexistence, but to truly embrace the freedom given to us to live together in a community marked by Christ, a reflection of the kingdom of God.

Paul knew this kind of love wasn't easy. He knew that humanity is prone to use our freedom to dominate others in systems of oppression rather than in systems that hold each other in this kind of mutual, holy love. He addresses this baseness of our humanity with a discussion of "the flesh." For Paul, this was a way of defining the motivating factor for our actions or our inactions. For Paul, living by the flesh was a self-centered living and it was in direct opposition to the God-centered living that life guided by the Spirit can bring. There is no middle ground here. Paul pushed the Galatians to pick a direction, arguing you can't be both for yourself first and for God first. It just doesn't work that way.

Paul goes on to quote what Jesus himself considered the greatest commandment, "to love your neighbor as yourself." For Paul, that simple – yet not so simple – command, "love your neighbor as yourself," answers the questions about the legalities that were being raised in the community. For Paul, the summation of the law is that we have been freed to love one another. And that means setting aside our own ambitions, our own desires to be first, and instead serve one another.

This is our calling. A calling to freedom. A calling to love. This calling came to the disciples and those who followed Jesus; it came to the Galatians and virtually every other church community to whom Paul wrote; and it comes to us, still as relevant as it was in the first century. Over two thousand years later, we as God's people are still trying to figure out what it means to live into this freedom of grace that we were given by Jesus Christ. Repeatedly, we fall into those traps of the "flesh," and work ourselves into systems that only serve to bolster ourselves while others are oppressed. This is an example of corporate sin. We all participate in it on varying levels as individuals, but this corporate sin is a reality of our communal existence here on earth. There are so many examples in our world where we have fallen woefully short of our calling to freedom.

Hunger is a real problem. It faces no boundary – in every single county in the United States, there are people facing hunger and food insecurity. Last year, over 50 million people turned to food banks and food pantries for help. **We can do better.**

Housing is another problem. According to the National Alliance to End Homelessness, in 2023, there were a record-high number of people who experienced homelessness, up over 12% from the previous year. Approximately 11% of the unsheltered population in the US are veterans. The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans reports that within that group, 50% have serious mental health issues, including PTSD; 70% struggle with substance abuse, and 51% have some sort of disability. Even with the good work of the VA and other organizations – whose budgets are being slashed, I might add – those who have served our country; those who have given their lives so that we can continue to claim "freedom," are underserved and unappreciated on even the most basic level. **We can do better. No. We MUST do better.**

If Paul were writing to us today, I think he would deliver much of the same message he did to the Galatians. To the church today he would likely say, "You were called to freedom for so much more than this! You were given freedom as a gift *from God* so that you can love as Christ loved." I think he would say, "Get with the program. You call yourselves Christians? Then live like it. Let love lead you. This is what it's all about. Love your neighbor as yourself." Above all else, we as Christians are called to love: an *agape* love that models the kind of love God has for us. This is the basic fabric of what it means to follow Christ. The extent to which we live into this calling is in itself the measure of our discipleship. May we be so faithful and bold as to live into it each and every day. May we love our neighbors, and do nothing from selfish ambition, but instead mark our lives with love. For this, my friends, is the freedom we have been given in Christ. This is what we are called to do. Amen.

*Riding with Jesus,*  
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*\*This month's newsletter is excerpted from a sermon given by my daughter, Rev. Robin Dillon, on June 29, 2025.*