

Perseveration (per-SEV-er-a-tion), it's a brain condition that causes people to get stuck in a particular pattern of behavior. Perseveration is what led a legendary, German, World War 1 ace known as The Red Baron, to pursue a British pilot far beyond the limits of safe flying and prudent dogfighting. On April 21, 1918, he flew his famous red tri-plane straight into enemy airspace, allowing aircraft and ground fire to shred his plane to ribbons and kill him with a bullet to the chest.

“He had target fixation and a mental rigidity,” says a clinical psychologist named Daniel Orme. The Red Baron “flew into a shooting gallery, violating all kinds of rules of flying — rules from the manual that he himself wrote.” Perseveration is a brain dysfunction that causes people to persist in a task — to carry on in a completely illogical way, even when the chosen strategy is doomed and could lead to death. The Red Baron wasn't born with this condition — in fact, for most of his career he was a careful aviation fighter who achieved 80 kills, more than any other World War I pilot. But he suffered a traumatic brain injury in a dogfight nine months before his death, and researchers now believe that this caused his dysfunction to develop.

Perseveration can be a problem for us as well, even without the dogfights — or cat-fights. Fatal fixations can pop up in our work, our parenting, our friendships, and our faith lives, causing us to pursue strategies that are doomed and even disastrous. Think of fathers or mothers who work like slaves to provide for their families, only to put in such long and exhausting hours that they end up with little of themselves to give to their family members. It's a fatal fixation.

Or parents who put a tremendous amount of time and energy into their children's activities, only to become so immersed in kid-stuff that they fail to be good adult role models. Or friends who talk endlessly about themselves and others — analyzing, criticizing, and ultimately destroying the very friendships that are the

subject of their conversations. Or Christians who put such effort into being righteous that they end up being self-righteous — which in turn leads to alienating the very people around them who need to hear the gospel.

A man was driving on a winding road, when he saw a “Road Closed” sign up ahead. Not seeing any construction taking place, he ignored the sign and drove on. He discovered the construction around the next bend and had to turn around and go back to follow the detour. As he approached the blockade, he saw on the back of the “Road Closed” sign, in hand-scrawled letters, a message: “Told you so!” These are all examples of perseveration — patterns of behavior that are doomed and dangerous, but so easy to get stuck in.

So, what can we do to avoid these fatal fixations you may be wondering? In our second lesson today, the apostle Paul is determined to show us how to move from death to new life, and from sin to righteousness. He is aware that many of us are still stuck in doomed and dangerous patterns, and he wants us to break free of anything that can hurt or destroy us. So he begins with the question, “How can we who died to sin go on living in it?”

It’s a good question. How is it possible for us to persist in sinful behavior, now that we are baptized followers of Jesus? Paul insists that our baptism in Christ Jesus was a baptism into his death, and he says that since Christ was raised from the dead then we, too, have been raised to “walk in a newness of life.” It really doesn’t make any sense for us to go on sinning, since our old sinful life is now dead, and our new resurrection life has begun.

The Problem is, we still sin. We plow ahead with our fatal fixations, traveling in dangerous directions that lead us to serious sinfulness. An individual who excessively focuses on work instead of family can fall prey to sins such as pride-fulness and selfishness. Moms and Dads who obsesses over their children may can lose their sense of identity and purpose. Friends can destroy themselves

and others with gossip, and Christians can poison the good news of the gospel with self-righteous attitudes. So much for a “newness of life!!!!”

Thankfully St. Paul is enough of a realist to see and understand that we are not completely free of sin. If we have been united with Christ in a death like his, he says, “we will certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his.” Paul in his letter to the Romans looks forward to the future, knowing that the full glory of resurrection life is not a present reality — it still lies off in the distance, like a beautiful oasis on the horizon. We’re on the road to the resurrection, for sure, but we haven’t quite reached the point where we can put the car in park and relax, knowing that we’ve finally arrived at our destination.

The good news for us today is that we’re moving in the right direction. In fact, we’ve already crossed the border, and have left the world of death and sin behind us. New Testament scholar N.T. Wright points out that Paul’s question “Should we continue in sin?” is best understood as being similar to the question “Should we remain in France?” Now don’t misunderstand — he’s not dissing the French, he’s simply saying that if we don’t want to remain in France, then we don’t have to speak French anymore. And if we don’t want to continue in sin, then we aren’t forced to sin anymore.

So can we live lives of absolute moral perfection? Well...probably not, it doesn’t seem very likely. Still, the paradox is that while it is impossible to be sinless, it is possible not to sin. Let’s say that your grandmother, for example, immigrated to the United States from Norway and she eventually learned to speak English. Will she live her life in America never again lapsing into Norwegian? Not likely. But it is possible for her to speak only English.

She’s been freed from the need to speak Norwegian. She doesn’t live in Norway. She keeps herself in the company of people who speak English. She doesn’t go to naughty Norwegian-speaking places, she doesn’t read Norwegian

magazines, she scrupulously avoids anything that may hurt her English. She considers herself a new person, with a new identity and a new country. She wants to speak English!..... But, yeah, darn right, it isn't hard for us to imagine that she might lapse into Norwegian every once in a while. And we will forgive her for it.

The point being is that Christ has evacuated us, he has saved us, from a world of sin and death, so we are no longer “enslaved to sin.” It's as though we've been airlifted out of Norway, so now we don't have to show our appreciation and thankfulness every day by saying “Takk skal du ha.” Because of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, we are free to speak a new language and enjoy a whole new quality of life. We have been freed from our fatal fixations and our sinful orientations, and we can now walk in newness of life.

Fathers— this means that you don't have to be a slave to the office. Come home at night. Listen to your wife. Play with your kids. Focus on your family. At the end of the day, your children won't know how much money you made. But they'll know how much attention you gave them. And parents, you don't have to be a slave to your kids. Develop your talents. Do meaningful work. Deepen your adult relationships. What your children need most is a healthy, happy authority figure — one who can be a good role model to them.

You friends out there, you don't always have to put all of your focus on your social group any more. There's no reason to waste so much time on gossip. Look outward, into the community, and put some energy into serving the world around you, instead of always talking **about** the people around you.

And Christians. The key to righteousness is being in a right relationship with Jesus, the one who died so that we might live. Since Christ has removed us from the land of sin and death, and started us down the road to resurrection life, then the only response we can make is one of thanks and praise. There's no room for self-

righteousness. There's no place for judgmental attitudes. There's no opportunity for condemnation.

There's only thanks — showing our gratitude and our appreciation to Jesus for making us “dead to sin and alive to God.” Jesus has given us the amazing gift of a resurrection life, and he simply asks us to place our trust in him. Instead of self-righteousness, let's show the world some Christ-righteousness. Instead of a judgmental attitude, let's exhibit some Christian gratitude. Instead of condemning others, let's lead them in a new direction.

It's clear that The Red Baron flew into a shooting gallery and was blown apart because he couldn't see anything but his target. He had a fatal fixation, one that prevented him from saving his own life, by simply turning around. Sometimes that's all it takes: a willingness to change direction, to make a U-turn, or as the Bible says: Repent.

We can save our own lives, and the lives of others, by turning around. The power of sinful per-severation has been broken by Jesus, and he invites us to join him on resurrection ground, on that place where sin and death have been replaced by grace and new life. We are now dead to sin and alive to God. We need not fixate on anything else. Thanks be to God. Amen.