

Fatal Fixation

Romans 6:1b-11 | 6/25/2017

Perseveration. It's a brain condition that causes people to get stuck in a particular pattern of behavior. Perseveration is what led a German pilot named Manfred von Richthofen, the legendary World War I 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 red Fokker triplane straight into enemy airspace, allowing aircraft and ground fire to shred his plane to ribbons and kill him with a bullet to the chest.

Certainly a dramatic example. But for those of us who aren't WWI aces, perhaps this example of continuing in self-destructive behavior is more understandable.

Joseph Sitler, in his book *Grace Notes and Other Fragments* tells this story about *Polish Sausage, St. Augustine and the Moral Life*. He tells of a food truck that would stop in front of the University of Chicago, and whose big seller was Polish Sausage. "Rich, juicy ... garlic-laden ... garnished with chopped onions, mustard, pickle relish and topped with green peppers ... that bring tears to the eyes, a clutch at the throat, and clarification to the mind."

One day he found himself in line with a pathologist who was a fellow church member. He asked him, "Dr. Platz, what are you doing here. You know that you ought not to eat one of these violent things! ... Now I am only a theologian and don't know any better. But ... you have professionally examined the catastrophic effect upon the stomach of these explosive, corrosive, tissue-eroding sausages!" Charles Platz fixed me with a cool gaze. "Yes," he said, "you are quite right. But these things are quite good, aren't they?" So Charles and I went on doing what we knew we shouldn't."

Perseveration can be a problem for us as well, even without the dogfights — or the Polish Sausages. 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 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 women who put tremendous 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 — and alienating the very people who need to hear the gospel. Nothing's a bigger turn-off than self-righteous folks who, in the words of Oscar Wilde, air their clean laundry in public.

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?

In his letter to the Romans, 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?" (Romans 6:2). It's a good question.

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 newness of life" (6:3-4). 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.

Problem is, we still sin. We plow ahead with our fatal fixations. Men who focus on work instead of family become absentee fathers. Women who obsess over their children lose their sense of identity and purpose. Friends destroy themselves and others with gossip, and Christians poison the good news of the gospel with self-righteous attitudes. So much for “newness of life.”

Paul is enough of a realist to see that we are not completely free of sin. 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. The good news for us today is that we’re moving in the right direction.

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 damning 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 absolutely moral perfection? Well, not likely. Still, the paradox is that while it is *impossible* to be sinless, it is *possible* not to sin.

Your grandmother, for example, is from France — or from Mexico City, or whatever; let’s say France — and she’s learned to speak English. Will she live her life never again lapsing into French? Not likely. But it is possible for her to speak English. *Possible*. She’s been freed from the need to speak French. She doesn’t live in France. She keeps herself in the company of people who speak English. She doesn’t go to naughty French-speaking places, she doesn’t read French magazines. She considers herself a new person, with a new identity and a new country. She wants to speak English. But, yeah, she’ll lapse into French every once in a while. And we forgive her. It’s about progress, not perfection.

The point is this: Christ has saved us from the world of sin and death, so we are no longer “enslaved to sin” (6:6). It’s as though we’ve been airlifted out of France, so now we don’t have to begin every day with “Bonjour.” 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 mothers, 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 mother — one who can be a good role model to them. You friends out there, there’s no reason to waste so much time on gossip. Look outward, into the community, and put some energy into *servicing* 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 Christ, the one who died so that we might live. Since Jesus 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 — thanks to Jesus for making us “dead to sin and alive to God” (v. 11). Jesus has given us this amazing gift of resurrection life, and he asks us simply to 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.

Sometimes all it takes is a willingness to change direction. Make a U-turn. Or, as the Bible says: Repent. The power of sinful perseveration 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.

Oh, by the way. My favorite lunch in Tucson is the \$1.50 special at Costco – a Polish Sausage and a 20 oz. soda. I love it, but I did skip it on my last trip to Costco!

Pastor Keith