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Have you ever gotten stuck in a rut in your life or found yourself doing the same thing over and over even though it's not helpful? Maybe you've felt like the guy who always ignored detour signs since he liked going on the route he had preplanned but often got stuck in the detour. He

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!"¹

When we get stuck in something that does us no good but we continue anyway, there's a word for that: Perseveration (per-SEV-er-a-tion), defined as "the tendency of an idea to stick in your mind or recur, or getting stuck on something mentally and not being able to shift gears."²

Although the apostle Paul wasn't aware of this term when he wrote his letter to the church in

Rome, he wrote to the church about the problem, for it was easy then, as now, to get stuck in patterns that do us no good. When those patterns become destructive to oneself or others, Paul called it *sin*. There must have been someone in one of those churches who asked him if it's ok to get stuck in sin since God is always ready to forgive, for Paul wrote in reply, "Should we continue in sin in order that grace may abound?" ^(6:1, NRSV) Or as another translation asks, "Should we keep on sinning, so that God's wonderful kindness will show up even better?" ^(CEV)

Paul replied, "Of course not!" and then he reminded them of their baptism. By being immersed in the water, he reminded them, our old self has died, buried in the water, and then we have been raised to new life as we emerged from the water. Since Christ has been raised to new life, we have new life as well, so Paul argues that we have no reason to keep sinning. We're dead to sin, he proclaimed, but we're alive to God.

It's not always easy to follow that plan, is it? We're so tempted to do things we know are wrong, as was the case with

Bill, an unscrupulous painter, who would often thin down his paint when hired to do a job, and pocket the money he'd save.

One day, the local church decided to do some long-awaited maintenance, and hired Bill for the job.

Bill gets to work, and after a good few hours, he's nearly done—as he stands on his scaffolding to finish off the steeple, he smiles to himself: the paint job looks pretty good, he's scammed the church out of a few hundred bucks, and he'll be done before dinner.

Suddenly, thunder ensues, a huge bolt of lightning knocks Bill right off his scaffolding, and the skies open up—and all of Bill's newly-applied paint washes right off the church.

Bill, a religious man despite his thievery, believes it's a sign from God. He falls to his knees in a puddle of rainwater and paint, and cries, "Oh God, forgive me! What should I do?"

And amongst the thunder, a booming voice: "REPAINT! REPAINT! AND THIN NO MORE!"³

Paul would agree on a variation of that advice: Repent and sin no more. As he explained in his letter to the church in Rome.

You are dead to sin and alive to God...That means you must not give sin a vote in the way you conduct your lives. Don't give it the time of day. Don't even run little errands that are connected with that old way of life. Throw yourselves wholeheartedly and full-time—remember, you've been raised from the dead!—into God's way of doing things. Sin can't tell you how to live...You're living in the freedom of God. (6:11-14, *The Message*.)

Rather than being stuck in the old patterns that destroy our lives or those around us, Christ gives us the courage to break out of those old patterns and addictions.

For example, rather than yelling at those around us every time we get frustrated, we have the possibility of treating others with respect.

Rather than parents ignoring the pleas of their children for attention, we have the opportunity to spend more time with our family.

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Rather than letting the pursuit of money become the focus of life, we have the opportunity to enjoy the simple pleasures of life and help others.

Rather than letting (*fill in the blank for yourself*), trust that Christ can make you alive to God rather than stuck in the old patterns of your life.

It's sometimes difficult to trust in the process of change, in the letting go of control and in letting God's Spirit move within us. Sometimes we may have patterns and habits so deep within us that we don't accept who we are, and we don't believe change is possible. We may forget the experiences of God's movement in our lives through the people around us, through the help we've been offered.

Many times, we may desire to avoid the struggles of our lives, wishing we could return our

turmoil and traumas as easily as returning a piece of clothing that doesn't seem to fit very well, as was the case with a woman who tried to return a dress to the store when she encountered a clerk who discerned the real issues and offered helpful words...

(Skit of woman returning dress to salesclerk)

It's in the struggles that we discover God's Spirit has been moving in our lives all along. Even though we can't return those parts of our lives that seem to not fit, God still welcomes us and accepts, for we have been made alive to God and given new life.

¹ *Homiletics* online, June 19, 2005.

² <https://www.yourdictionary.com/perseveration>

³ Anonymous.