

Romans 6:12-23 N.T. 146 (NRSV)

¹²Therefore, do not let sin exercise dominion in your mortal bodies, to make you obey their passions. ¹³No longer present your members to sin as instruments of wickedness, but present yourselves to God as those who have been brought from death to life, and present your members to God as instruments of righteousness. ¹⁴For sin will have no dominion over you, since you are not under law but under grace.

¹⁵What then? Should we sin because we are not under law but under grace? By no means! ¹⁶Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves, you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness? ¹⁷But thanks be to God that you, having once been slaves of sin, have become obedient from the heart to the form of teaching to which you were entrusted, ¹⁸and that you, having been set free from sin, have become slaves of righteousness. ¹⁹I am speaking in human terms because of your natural limitations. For just as you once presented your members as slaves to impurity and to greater and greater iniquity, so now present your members as slaves to righteousness for sanctification.

²⁰When you were slaves of sin, you were free in regard to righteousness. ²¹So what advantage did you then get from the things of which you now are ashamed? The end of those things is death. ²²But now that you have been freed from sin and enslaved to God, the advantage you get is sanctification. The end is eternal life. ²³For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

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“Tunnel Vision”

Opening Prayer: Please bow with me in prayer. O God, our God, we come from lives full of distractions. In our hearts we want to be your people, but we’re so easily led astray. Draw us close to you and instruct us in your live giving ways today. In Jesus’ Name we pray, **Amen.**

Introduction: **Once when I was reading** about cycling when I ran into a new word. The word was “**stravacide.**” Let’s break it down. **Strava** is the name of a popular cycling app that allows cyclists to log their **GPS course and time.** Then other cyclists can ride the same course and see if they can beat your time. And if they do, you get and message telling you you’ve been unseated. **The word Strava** is a Swedish word meaning “**to strive.**” The object of the app is to help a cyclists strive to be a better and faster.

That brings us to the second part of the word, the suffix “cide,” which means the “**the act of killing.**” So that’s “cide” as in “**homicide,**” the act of one human being killing another, or “**suicide,**” the act of killing one’s self. **So stravacide** is “the act of killing by striving.”

Strava has become a very popular website among amateur cyclists who are highly competitive. You can take a lot of pride in un-seating some other cyclist on a particular course. And as soon as you get a message telling you someone else has unseated you, you immediately set out to reclaim your title. This is all harmless fun, right? Well, most of the time it is. But what happens when someone is so driven to reclaim their title that they throw caution to the wind?

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On June 6, 2010 Kim Flint set a record on a 1.4 mile downhill course with several sharp blind curves along South Park Drive in Berkeley hills near San Francisco. Flint's average speed was **39.9 miles an hour**. Pretty impressive for a road **with a posted speed limit of 30 mph**. A few days later another rider beat Flint's record by 4 second. So, on June 19th Flint set out to reclaim his record. **But this time** while rounding one of those blind curves, Flint was in the wrong lane and slammed head on into a SUV coming up the hill. **Flint died** in the hospital a few days later.

Since then, people have been tracking cyclists who have been killed or seriously injured trying to claim a Starva course title. One common theme has emerged. Each of these cyclists has become so focused on claiming the title, that **they throw normal caution to the wind**. They take chances no rational, prudent cyclist would. **And the result is stravaicide**, they kill themselves by striving.

PAUSE

Move I.

Not every goal is worth the cost. The goal may be a good and admirable thing. There's nothing wrong with wanting to be the fastest person to bike the South Park Drive decent segment on Strava. **Being competitive is a good thing.** Being in good physical condition is a good thing too. **But cutting into** the other lane rounding a blind curve to shave a second or two off your time **is like playing Russian roulette.** You might get away with it this time, or the next time, but sooner or later there's gonna be a car coming the other way.

That's what happened on June 19th, 2010. **A young mother** and her daughter were rounding that bend when suddenly **they saw Kim Flint** crossing the center line heading towards them. Flint braked hard and the SUV swerved right as Flint ricocheted off the left side of the SUV and flew 40-feet through the air before crashing into the pavement. Flint didn't wanna die, he had a good job, a loving girlfriend, and great parents, but he let his drive to achieve the shortest time get the best of him. There are more important things in life than being the fastest on some downhill amateur biking course. We all know that. Flint knew that too. But entering that blind turn, Flint took a senseless risk, he cut into the oncoming lane, and it cost him his life, not to mention cutting short his attempt at the record.

Our Bible lesson today speaks of the reality of losing sight of what's important in life. The Apostle Paul is **examining what it is that motivates** people to do what they're doing. Paul speaks using terminology that makes us uncomfortable today. He speaks in terms of slaves and masters. **In Romans 6:16 (NRSV)** Paul writes, **“Do you not know that if you present yourselves to anyone as obedient slaves you are slaves of the one whom you obey, either of sin, which leads to death, or of obedience, which leads to righteousness?”**

What are you a slave too? What has mastery over your life? Are you a slave to sin, or are you a slave to righteousness?

To be a slave of sin, is to be self-centered. You want what you want for your own sake. Others don't factor into to your equation. You want the record time. Winning has become your master. You will risk everything to achieve that goal. It's not that you do it consciously. It just that all other considerations fade away. Winning isn't just the main thing, it's the only thing. That's what sin is like, **it wants what it wants**. **Sin wants** its glory. **Sin wants** its pleasure. **Sin wants** its money. **Sin wants** to be the king of the hill. It's the center of the universe and everything else is subservient to it. Sin isn't just an action, it's a frame of mind; it's a mental condition. Sin is indiscriminate, it doesn't care who it hurts. It can hurt you, or your family, or even total strangers.

In May of 2012 another cyclist, trying to claim a Strava title for another descent course in the San Francisco area, struck and killed a 71-year old pedestrian and injured himself. Police arrest that cyclist in the hospital and charged him with vehicular homicide.

Now I want to be careful here. I'm not saying that these two cyclists are any worse sinners than the rest of us. I'm simply using their frame of mind at the time of their lapse in judgment which led to these horrific events to show what **it's like to have sin as your master**. All you see is the goal. All you want is the best time. The cost doesn't even enter the equation. It's clearly not worth it, but you charge ahead anyway. **Dame the torpedoes and full speed ahead.** That what's it's like to have sin as your master. **Yes, not every goal is worth the cost.**

End I.

Move II.

But we end up making deadly choices anyway. That's what it means to be human. Left to our own devices, we will, and do mess up. We lose perspective and do whatever we think is best for us, but sometimes we're wrong; dead wrong. **We're really no different than Kim Flint. We'll play Russian roulette** to get what we think we need. That's what comes naturally to us. But as the ancient sages of Israel told us long, long ago, **"There is a way that seems right to a person, but its end is the way to death."** (Proverbs 14:12) Cutting the corner on a blind curve seemed right to Kim Flint, but that didn't turn out like he planned. And leading life our own way isn't going to turn out like we're planning either.

One of the hardest parts of being a preacher in America today, is striking the balance between being culturally relevant and theological true. **Many people**, including many people in the church, think we're living in a Christian culture. They think the American flag and the Cross of Christ stand for the same things. But if you read today's Bible lesson from Romans 6, you'll quickly see the gaping holes in that supposition.

Now I'm not out to embarrass anyone here today, so I'm not going to ask you to raise your hand for these next couple of questions. Keep your answers to yourself. First let me word it like this. Do you agree with this statement?

"People are basically good."

Sure there are bad people in the world, but they are just products of poor homes and bad parents. Most people are basically good. **Do you agree** with that statement or not? Remember, keep your answer to yourself.

Ok, now let we reword that statement to make it even more personal. Do you agree with the statement when I word it this way?

"I am basically good."

Sure I mess up now and again, but on average, I'm a good person.

Most people in America, including most people in the church, **agree** with those statements. They believe people are basically good. And when you personalize that statement, even more church people will agree. “Other people might be bad, but as for me, I’m good.” **Do you agree** with that, or not? Again, keep your answer to yourself.

Well, if that’s what you believe, then you’re not going to like what I’m about to say. People are not basically good, **people are basically sinful**. People are selfish, they’re self-centered, they’re egotistical, and they’re self-righteous. And I’m not just attributing that description to other people, I’m attributing it me too. Yes, I’m basically sinful too. We’re all basically sinful. **That’s what’s Biblical. That’s what’s Christian.**

Biblically we need look no further than **Romans 3:23 (NRSV)** where the Apostle Paul emphatically states, “**since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God;**” All means all. **Adam** sinned. **Abraham** sinned. **King David** sinned. **Peter, James, and John** sinned too. The Bible tells us the human condition is sinful. The only person who hasn’t sinned is Jesus. **All have sinned**, including me and you. That’s what the Bible says.

As for Christian theology, let’s look at the *Confession of Faith* in the *United Methodist Book of Discipline*. Let me quote from Article VII on page 72.

“**We believe man is fallen from righteousness** and, apart from the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, is destitute of holiness and **inclined to evil**. [...] In his own strength, without divine grace, man **cannot do good works** pleasing and acceptable to God.” That’s a basic Christian belief, but it’s not a common belief in American today, if it ever really was. **Basic goodness** rest with God, not with us human beings. Sure, we do have freewill. We are free to do what is good and pleasing to God. **But we still end up making deadly choices anyway.**

End II.

Move III.

So, let God be the master of your life. Let God guild your paths. Let God chart your course. Let God set your destination. **As Jesus says in Matthew 6:24 (NRSV), “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other.”** You cannot serve both yourself and God. You have to choose. You can't remain neutral. Using Biblical terminology, are you going to live life according to your sinful nature, or are you going to live life as the new creature you are becoming in Christ Jesus? The choice is yours to make. And you need to choose wisely, or there will be deadly consequences. Eternal consequences.

I was talking with a friend not long ago and he made a common observation. *“No one talks about sin anymore.”* Society certainly doesn't talk about sin, **it does talk about evil**, but never about sin. Evil is a safe subject because it's detached. **But sin is too personal**, it rests too close to home.

In the late 1980's, Karl Menninger, the father of modern psychiatric medicine, wrote a landmark book called, *“Whatever Became of Sin?”* Menninger observed that while the word “sin” has almost disappeared from our everyday vocabulary, the underlying sense of guilt and detachment remains. People are apprehensive, depressed, and overcome by an all too common sense of gloom. Most people know something is wrong, they just can't name it. From his many years as a practicing psychiatrist, Menninger concludes, **mental health and moral health and identical**. To be a healthy human being you have to face the reality of sin.

This week marks the beginning of my sixth year as your pastor. While I will admit I probably don't talk about sin as much as I should, I do talk about it. If you ask the typical person what sin is, they likely will say doing bad things. **Sin is** lying, cheating, stealing, murdering, and the like. That's true enough. That what's called **moral sin**.

But when I speak of sin I almost always put it in relational terms. Sin is about the relationship between God and you. I'm sure you've heard me say, "sin is *anything the separates you from God.*" I've also told you that's not some idea I came up with myself. **That's how the 20-century** German theologian Paul Tillich defined sin. "*Sin is alienation from God.*" Sin isn't so much a long list of "thou shalt not's" as it is a state of mind that looks away from God.

Back in the days of Noah, by in large the peoples of the earth had given up on having a relationship with God. **According to Genesis 6:5 (NIV)** "**every inclination of the thoughts of the human heart was only evil all of the time.**" People thought about their own needs, about their own wants, about their own conquests, about their own pleasures. They crowded God out altogether. **That's what it is to be sinful**—you put God out of your mind, out of your heart. Day and night, you do what you want to do. Sin isn't rooted in the actions we do that are morally wrong, **it's rooted in the heart** that's becomes so calloused to God, that it no longer feels any guilt. **It has developed tunnel vision.** It stops measuring the risks. It stops considering the consequences. It stops being a moral agent. It does whatever it thinks is best. **It strives toward death.**

Are you suffering from tunnel vision? Are you caught in a life **destined for stravacide**? Is your striving going to kill you? **What's the master of your life?** **It is success? Is it wealth? Is it popularity? It is having fun? It is your kids? Your grandkids?** Anything that separates you from God is sin. Anything! **We all have sinful nature.** It's very real. It wants to rule your life. But as Paul warns us, "**For the wages of sin is death.**" **It's stravacide.** "**But the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord**" (Romans 6:23, NRSV). You really can't keep serving two masters. **So, please, let God be the master of your life.**

End III.

Conclusion: Don't commit stravacide. Don't let your strivings kill you. **Yes, not every goal is worth the cost.** It's foolish to play Russian roulette with your eternal destiny. **But we still end up making deadly choices anyway.** We say damn the torpedoes! Full speed ahead! We throw caution to the wind and we do whatever we think best. Oh, there is a way that seems right to a person, but in the end it leads to death. **So, please, let God be the master of your life.** No one can serve two masters. You can't serve yourself and God. **Tunnel vision is stravacide.** Your striving is killing you. **Make Jesus** the master of your life, **and live—forever.**

Closing Prayer: Let's pray. O God, your ways are higher than our ways, and your thoughts are higher than our thoughts (Isaiah 55:9). Lead us in your ways today and fill us with your thoughts. Allow us to live, forever. **Amen!**

10:00 Closing Hymn: “Be Thou My Vision” Hymnal 451

Sending Forth: Are you anxious? Is life a struggle? Then stop trying to go your own way. Tunnel vision is stravacide. The striving is gonna be the death of you. Go forth and make Jesus the Master of your life today and live! **And all of God's people said...Amen!**