



Greenwood Baptist Church

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Is It a Sin or Not?

Romans 14:1-6

In this week's history moment, we're talking about a guy named Robert Paine. I hope you remember the circumstances of the Boston Massacre. There were people protesting—it was mostly peaceful. The British soldiers came out to try to tamp down the protest. There was a dispute about what happened after that. Maybe some things were thrown, and words were spoken, but shots were fired. The commanding officer denied having ordered shots to be fired, but they were, and several in the crowd were killed as a result. One of them was a young boy.

As a result, charges were brought against the soldiers, and they stood trial for their actions. The prosecuting attorney was a man named Robert Paine. He was a very good attorney. The defense attorney was a gentleman named John Adams. John Adams defended the British soldiers in this case. It was a powder keg moment in the history of the United States. John Adams defended them so well that most of them were acquitted. A couple were found guilty of certain charges and did face some punishment, but not for murder.

Robert Paine and John Adams both zealously defended their clients and disagreed about the facts and about what they wanted the outcome of that case to be. What's interesting is that a few years later, Robert Paine, along with John Adams, signed the Declaration of Independence. If you have this idea that our founders got together around a campfire, sang Kumbaya, and came out with the Declaration of Independence, it wasn't like that at all.

There were all kinds of conflicts, arguments, and disagreements back and forth, and Robert Paine actually earned a nickname in Congress as they were trying to draft the words of the Declaration. His nickname was "The Objector." Any time somebody brought forth an idea, he would stand up, poke as many holes in it as he could, and argue against it as passionately as he knew how. They needed that to get down to what they got down to. There were a lot of things they wanted to put in there that weren't in there. Even Jefferson's final draft was still revised by Congress several times.

Sometimes we need that. As people and as a church, we need others to see things differently than we do. And that's a good thing. Then there are times—and here's what we're going to talk about today—when something might be a sin for you, and it's not a sin for someone else. Or maybe it's a sin for someone else, and it's not a sin for you. So the answer to both of those questions is yes. There are times like that. In Romans 14, there was an instance in which people passionately

believed in a certain element—something in their lives—and tried to impose it on everyone else. That created problems.

So here is what we're going to talk about today: I believe there are three times when the Scripture tells us that something may be a sin for us but not for someone else. We're going to talk about when those circumstances occur. We're going to start by reading Romans 14:1-6. By the way, this is the first known record of vegans and keto people arguing in history.

Romans 14:1-6:

"Accept other believers who are weak in faith, and don't argue with them about what they think is right or wrong. For instance, one person believes it's all right to eat anything. But another believer with a sensitive conscience will eat only vegetables. Those who feel free to eat anything must not look down on those who don't. And those who don't eat certain foods must not condemn those who do, for God has accepted them."

Who are you to condemn someone else's servants? Their own master will judge whether they stand or fall. And with the Lord's help, they will stand and receive his approval. In the same way, some think one day is more holy than another day, while others think every day is alike. You should each be fully convinced that whichever day you choose is acceptable."

Those who worship the Lord on a special day do it to honor him. Those who eat any kind of food do so to honor the Lord, since they give thanks to God before eating. And those who refuse to eat certain foods also want to please the Lord and give thanks to God."

Paul tells them, "Look, you all have different opinions on this. These people think this, and these people think that." In 1 Corinthians, he also discusses another situation in chapter 8. This was a slightly different circumstance. There were markets throughout the town of Corinth. Corinth was one of the most ungodly places you could be. There were all kinds of temples to false gods. They would sacrifice animals in these temples, and after the sacrifice, they would butcher the animals, bring them out, and sell them to raise money for whichever temple they were part of.

Some Christians were like, "So what? It's just meat. There aren't any other gods. It's no big deal." Others were like, "Wait a minute. These were sacrificed to idols. You can't eat that." So Paul addresses that in chapter 8. I'm going to read verses 4-9:

"So, what about eating meat that has been offered to idols? Well, we all know that an idol is not really a god and that there is only one God. There may be so-called gods both in heaven and on earth, and some people actually worship many gods and many Lords. But for us, there is one God, the Father, by whom all things were created, and for whom we live. And there is one Lord, Jesus Christ, through whom all things were created, and through whom we live. However, not all believers know this."

Some are accustomed to thinking of idols as being real, so when they eat food that has been offered to idols, they think of it as the worship of real gods, and their weak consciences are violated. It's true that we can't win God's approval by what we eat. We don't lose anything if

we don't eat it, and we don't gain anything if we do. But you must be careful so that your freedom does not cause others with a weaker conscience to stumble."

So, here's where we're going to get to. "How do I know what's the right thing to do here?" I have certain opinions about whether you ought to eat meat or not; so do you, probably. There is nothing inherently wrong with being a vegan. You want to be a vegan? I'm not going to judge you on that. If you invite me to your house and only serve vegetables, I probably won't eat much, but I'll do my best. Now, if you try to offer me Blue Bunny instead of Blue Bell, I'm going to judge you. I'm going to tell you that right now. But we can still be friends, love one another, and move on.

How do you know? There are certain things—the one about meat offered to idols—that, to me, would be difficult. That would be something I'd have to wrestle with a lot more. So how do I know what the right thing is? Well, we've been given the Holy Spirit. Jesus said He would come and teach you all things. The Holy Spirit is also our conscience. If your conscience tells you it's wrong, then for you it may be wrong. Maybe you need to say, "You know what? I hear and understand the arguments on the other side, but this is the way I believe is the right way to go."

Romans 14:12-16:

"Yes, each of us will give a personal account to God." We're not going to be judged by our sins in life, but we are going to be judged by the things we do. But here's the deal: I'm going to be judged for my actions. I'm not going to be judged for your actions. God's not going to take me up and say, "Hey, tell me about your life. What about this?" He is not going to say, "Well, what about this person?" That's not my business. That's between that person and God. So each of us is going to give a personal account to God. So what does he say?

"So let's stop condemning each other." Understand this. There are clear lines in Scripture. There are many things in Scripture that are clear. For example, you can't steal; you're not supposed to cheat on your spouse—have sex with another person; you're not supposed to covet your neighbor's stuff; you're not supposed to lie. There are all kinds of things that are clear and that we know are clearly sins. So it's not wrong to go up to somebody you love and say, "This is wrong," and confront them about it. We're called to do that.

But there are other things. You might find something that works really well for you. I know vegans who have said, "Man, that changed my life!" And that's fine—that's great! You might even say, "Hey, you might try this." If somebody else wants to try it, fine. But you don't get to say, "Well, you're wrong if you don't do this," or "You're in sin if you don't do that. I believe God showed me this path. This is the way I need to go. So anybody who doesn't take it is in sin."

You don't get to say that because it's not something outlined in Scripture. That may be something the Lord showed you for you, because we're all made differently. You never know what a person might or might not respond to.

"So let's stop condemning each other. Decide instead to live in such a way that you will not cause another believer to stumble and fall. I know and am convinced on the authority of the

Lord Jesus that no food, in and of itself, is wrong to eat. Listen to this: ***"But if someone believes it is wrong, then for that person it is wrong."***

So we have a conscience. There may be a reason. You know what? It may be that God has designed them in such a way that this *is* best for their body. It may be that God is telling them this is what they need to do. We don't all have to do the same things. We have freedom in Christ, and the Holy Spirit will lead us and teach us. If your conscience tells you something is wrong, then follow that. That's fine. For you, it's wrong. But that doesn't mean it's wrong for everybody else.

We need to understand that God is a very personal God who leads and teaches us as we go. Part of that is that God's process—there are things that happen to us. When we come to know Jesus, the Bible tells us we are immediately justified. In other words, God says your sins are wiped away; you've been declared righteous. God sees you as without sin. That happens the moment we accept Christ—the moment we trust Him as our Savior and Lord.

But there is another thing that begins in that moment as well. That's a process we call "sanctification." It means being set apart. It means we're becoming more like Jesus. It says in 2 Corinthians 3:16-18:

"But whenever someone turns to the Lord, the veil is taken away." That's what keeps us from seeing, understanding, and knowing the truth. ***"For the Lord is the Spirit, and wherever the Spirit of the Lord is, there is freedom."*** So we have freedom. ***"So all of us who have had that veil removed can see and reflect the glory of the Lord. And the Lord—who is the Spirit—makes us more and more like him as we are changed into his glorious image."***

That begins the moment we are saved, but it doesn't end until we come face to face with Christ. It says that at that moment we will be just like Him because we will see Him as He is. But we're not going to achieve that here on this earth; we move toward becoming more and more like Christ. It's a process that begins the moment we're saved and is not finished until we are face to face with Christ. Through that, the Holy Spirit begins to convict us. The Holy Spirit says, "Hey, it's time to drop this, it's time to change this, and it's time to move this."

That's part of becoming more and more like Jesus. Now, God may convict you of something, even after you've followed Christ for ten years. You see someone who has just begun following Jesus, and they're doing something God has convicted you about. You've changed. You might think, "Man, I need to go tell them. They need to drop that!" No, you don't! They've got the Holy Spirit too, and the Holy Spirit will work on them as the Holy Spirit sees fit.

So it's not my job to be other people's Holy Spirit. If it's clearly in the Word and they're doing something clearly contrary to the Word of God, then yes, I should probably talk to them. But we also have to give room for the Holy Spirit to work in other people's lives, just as He works in ours. There are things God has convicted me of at times that I didn't have any problem with until God said, "Hey, you know what? It's time to leave this along the road and move on."

Some of those things are simply part of maturing and growing in Christ. Some things may not have been that bad, but God may say, "You know, it's time to lay that down." Paul addresses this in 1 Corinthians 13:11-12 as well:

"When I was a child, I spoke and thought and reasoned as a child. But when I grew up, I put away childish things. Now we see things imperfectly, like puzzling reflections in a mirror, but then we will see everything with perfect clarity. All that I know now is partial and incomplete, but then I will know everything completely, just as God now knows me completely."

You see kids, and they do certain things, and sometimes we think they're funny when they're kids. But it's not as funny when they're adults, is it? We have to teach kids. I remember Taylor got into this habit—we would give him a piece of banana or something to eat, and he would take it and drop it on the floor. The first few times it was funny, but then it was like, "Okay, you've got to stop because we've got to pick all of that up." Kids drop their juice glass just to watch us pick it up. Did you ever notice that?

You might think that's funny when they're a kid, but it isn't when they're fifteen. We finally got Taylor broken of that, and we had dropped him off at my parents' house for a few days while we went to a conference or something. We called them on the way back and said, "Hey, how are things going?" "Oh, it's going great! He did something so funny! We were giving him pieces of a banana, and he started dropping them on the floor. We just laughed, and laughed, and laughed!" We had to do that whole thing all over again to break him of that!

Because it's all funny and good to a point. And those same things are true for us as we follow Christ. There are things we don't know. We don't always know what we don't know. But the Holy Spirit starts to work on us, and we're like, "You know what? It's time to stop that. It's time to move on from that." Some of that is just growing to be more like Jesus. Some of it is God convicting us of things that are getting in the way of that. And some of the things God convicts us of aren't even bad things.

Sometimes God says, "Okay, it's time to drop this. This is getting in the way of you following me." So we have to be patient as God teaches us. We definitely have to be patient. It's much easier to be patient with God working in us than with God working in somebody else, because we think we know. We just want to go tell them, "Hey, you need to stop this. Quit that. Quit doing this." We try to be the Holy Spirit. We need to follow our own conscience and understand that we're responsible for what God leads us to do and how God deals with us.

When God starts telling you, "Hey..." and you feel your conscience pricked, "I need to stop this, or I need to change this, or I need to do something about it," you're responsible for that, but you're not responsible for that in somebody else's life. The second thing is this: when it causes somebody else to stumble. Sometimes the thing we can do, and we think it's fine or no big deal, can be a big deal to somebody else.

Paul talked about the meat offered to idols in that passage. He said, "You know what? I know in my heart that it's not a big deal." As a matter of fact, he says in Romans 14:20-22:

"Don't tear apart the work of God over what you eat. Remember, all foods are acceptable, but it is wrong to eat something if it makes another person stumble. It is better not to eat meat or drink wine or do anything else if it might cause another believer to stumble. You may believe there's nothing wrong with what you are doing, but keep it between yourself and God. Blessed are those who don't feel guilty for doing something they have decided is right."

Now, you all know I've talked to you about alcohol before. I'm not going to get into that a whole bunch. But here is something you need to take into account: if you choose—and there are people I know who choose and are able to handle it. Whatever. That's fine. But you also need to understand that what you're doing is seen by other people, and it might influence them.

One of the reasons I don't drink is that number one, I don't believe in it. I don't believe it's right for me. I believe it would be a sin for me to drink. If you ever see me with a drink in my hand, you can come up to me and say, "Pastor, you're sinning. You told me yourself." Go right ahead, because you will never see me doing that. One of the reasons I would never do that is because I don't want somebody else coming up and saying, "Well, the pastor does it. So what? It must be fine. I'm going to go and do it too." And then they become addicted to it or become an alcoholic.

You have to realize that you can go around saying, "Well, it's fine. There's nothing wrong with it. I've already determined that." But you do have to take into account the good of others. One of the things you've got to be careful about is the people you are around and the people you influence. And you are responsible. Not for what they do, but for what you do that might cause them to do something. So sometimes we choose not to do things because it might cause somebody else to stumble.

Now that's for you and God to work out. I'm not going to tell you what to do with that. I've told you what I do. Our staff is committed to that. We don't do that, and there are reasons for it. As a leader, I don't believe it would be appropriate for me to do something that could cause someone else to stumble. So we have made the conscious decision not to do that. Now, I'm not trying to tell you that you have the responsibilities of a pastor—you don't. But that doesn't mean you have no responsibility, because you do.

1 Corinthians 10:23-24:

"You say, 'I am allowed to do anything'—but not everything is good for you. You say, 'I am allowed to do anything'—but not everything is beneficial." You see, there is what is good for you and what is beneficial. Is something beneficial for you? You can make that argument if you want to, but then it says, "Don't be concerned for your own good but for the good of others."

Sometimes we need to lay something down because it affects someone else. If you know that someone got in trouble because they got into something that seemed like a good thing at first, but they started making bad choices because of it, and it ruined part of their family, you don't ask them to go do that thing with you. Even if it's just a hobby. You've got to learn to be careful and to take into account the fact that others may not be where you are on something.

There are people in our church who are recovering alcoholics and recovering drug addicts. The last thing you'd want to do is think, "Man, I caused them to stumble. I invited them over, and I didn't know. So I offered them this, and I offered them that." And they thought, "This guy is doing it, and he's a believer. Why shouldn't I?" Be careful about what you do, and understand that when you do something that can cause somebody else to stumble, you're responsible for that. So we need to be careful.

Now, you can't know what everybody is doing all the time. I understand that. I'm not just talking to you about alcohol—you understand that. I'm talking about anything. You don't invite a vegan over to your house and put a steak in front of them. Not a good idea. If that's what their conscience has told them to do, cook them up some green, nasty Brussels sprouts or whatever, and offer them those. I don't know. I mean, don't do that to *me*, okay? But be careful about it and be sensitive to what other people are doing.

As I said, if you feel that being a vegan has enhanced your life, then cool. Do it! If you feel that eating only steak or meat has enhanced... then go do that! But that doesn't mean everybody else is going to do it, and you've got to be careful about opportunities or times when you might cause somebody else to stumble.

Now, here is the third one. This is the most dangerous. Sometimes you need to let go of something, lay it down, or stop doing it if it has the potential to enslave you. What does that mean? 1 Corinthians 6:12. It's almost exactly like the other verse, except for the end. He says, ***"You say, 'I am allowed to do anything'—but not everything is good for you."*** But what about things that aren't bad in and of themselves? ***"And even though 'I am allowed to do anything,' I must not become a slave to anything."***

"I must not become a slave to anything." What does it mean to become a slave to something? I want you to think of it as a throne in your heart, with the thing most important in your life sitting on that throne. Jesus is supposed to be on that throne, but we all know there are times when we'll put something else there, and something else starts to be the most important thing. It's the thing we think about most. We're always after it. We're willing to spend more money than we ought to.

We're willing to set aside things we know are the right things to do in order to do that, because that's on the throne at the moment. I'd be the first to tell you I'm an obsessive, addictive kind of person. I've never been addicted to alcohol or drugs or anything like that, but there was a time when somebody took me bird hunting. For most people, it's, "Well, that's cool, that was fun." But it was more than that for me. Not only did I get into it, but I also became a little bit obsessive about it.

It would have been fine if I had just found a place to hunt a couple of times a year. I didn't do that. I spent thousands of dollars on a deal with leases I could use whenever I wanted, all over Kansas where there were birds—where there were quail. Then I had to have a bird dog. You need at least two, so I got two bird dogs. I drove hours—I studied the bloodlines and knew exactly what I wanted. I drove for one up in Missouri and another over in Oklahoma, and brought them back. We were living in Arkansas at the time.

Not only did I have my own bird dogs, but I also started a bird-dog breeding program. That's a little obsessive, right there. I had everything you could possibly want. I had them trained; I would spend nights in hotels—I took my vacation to go bird hunting. It was fun! But it became too much. It became too important to me. And at some point I was like, "You know what? I've got to lay this down." And let me tell you something. I couldn't just back off a little bit. Anybody else in here? You can't just back off a little bit. I just can't!

So I had to get rid of all of them. Let me tell you something: these weren't just minor-league dogs I had. A few years ago, I got an email from a guy who said, "Hey, do you still breed those dogs? That dog I got from you..." I sold the ones I didn't want. I'd keep them long enough to know which ones I wanted, then sell the rest. He said, "That was the best bird dog I ever had. Do you have any? I'll buy some more." At the time, I was like, "Man, I could do this..." See? I got tempted. But I knew I couldn't just do a little bit. It was either all or nothing.

That's one of the things you've got to be careful about. Now, if somebody invited me to go bird hunting, I might say, "Okay, if you've got the stuff, I'll go with you once," and that would be it. But I might have to pray about it because it could be a mistake. If you've got anything in your life that you think you're doing in moderation but that has enslaved you in the past, you need to be careful because you're playing with fire. You need to be careful. Sometimes it takes us a while to understand what we can be addicted to, what can grab hold of us, or what can enslave us.

But be careful, because if you just start doing something a little bit that at times has controlled you, you're playing with the thing that enslaved you at one point; you've allowed it back into your life, even a little bit. It might be something that's clear to everyone. Everybody might say, "Well, it's wrong to be addicted to that!" Or it might be something else that's just for you. If you want to go bird hunting, go! I'm cool. It doesn't bother me. But I know I've got to be careful with stuff like that. I don't want to allow it to take a foothold in my life again.

I'm at a different point in life now. My last kid is graduating, and about to go to college, so I've got a little more time. I might do some things I couldn't before, and that's fine. But you've got to be careful about what you allow into your life. If it's led you to make bad decisions in the past, be careful about playing around with it. "I must not become a slave to anything." So what are we supposed to do?

1 Peter 3:15-16:

"Instead, you must worship Christ as Lord of your life."

You must worship Christ as Lord of your life. Jesus is Lord, and Jesus needs to be on that throne in your heart. I'm going to ask you all right now—you don't have to say it out loud or come tell me. This is just for your benefit. But be honest. If you're looking in your heart—and remember, you don't get to give a Sunday school answer, "Oh yes, Jesus is first." I've had plenty of people say, "It's God, then family, then something else." I've met plenty of people who said that but didn't live it. I'll bet you have too.

What I'm asking you is: is it really God in first place there? Is it really Jesus on the throne? Or is it something else? You don't have to be honest with me, but at least be honest with yourself. Because the worst kind of deception is self-deception. If you're willing to lie to yourself about it, that is a pathway to destruction.

"Instead, you must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way. Keep your conscience clear. Then if people speak against you, they will be ashamed when they see what a good life you live because you belong to Christ."

Those are some of the problems we face when we ignore our conscience and decide, "You know, it's really not that big of a deal." It's better not to do something that's okay if we have concerns about it, haven't worked it all out, or need to pray about it. It's better to say no to something that's perfectly fine than to say yes to something that's going to enslave you.

It's better to say no to something that might cause someone else to stumble than to say yes to something that harms someone you love, someone you know, or someone you care about. It's better not to do something, even if it's a good thing you've enjoyed at times, if you know it's going to enslave you because it has enslaved you in the past. Very few people can go from being addicted to something, enslaved by something—you can call it whatever you want—to just doing it in moderation. You've got to wipe it out first.

Maybe there's something in your life you need to wipe out. It might be a hobby, a relationship, or what you're putting into your work. Maybe you're addicted to success. I don't mean you've got to turn around and become a failure, but you've got to make sure Jesus is first. Here's the thing about that: If Jesus is on the throne in your heart as He's supposed to be, it becomes much easier and more fluid for the other things in your life to fall into the right order.

If you're loving the Lord as you're supposed to and He is leading your life, you're going to love your family as you're supposed to. If you're loving God the way you're called to and worshipping Christ as Lord of your life, as you're called to do, then you know what? You're going to do what's right by your church and live in a way that pleases Him.

But I'm going to tell you what—if you let anything else sit on that throne, it will throw everything else into doubt and eventually change the whole order. Jesus has to be first for everything else to be in the right place. Be honest with yourself about who or what is on that throne. If it isn't Jesus, you're headed in a dangerous direction and playing with fire. There are some things you may need to say no to.

There are things God told me to set aside because He knew I wouldn't have time for them with what He had coming for me, or there was something better the Lord had in store for me and that was going to get in the way. There are times I've laid things down because I didn't want to cause anyone else to stumble. And then there are things I've laid down because they enslaved me and kept demanding more. I went along willingly. I loved it. But it wasn't healthy, it wasn't good, and it wasn't beneficial. In the end, the only way to stop it was to stop.

For some of you, no one needs to come into your life to point those things out. You already know what they are. The question isn't whether you know them; it's what you're going to do with them. You must choose to worship Christ as Lord of your life. The first step is to reaffirm, "You're my Lord, You're first; I'm going to follow Your ways. I'm going to do as You command, as You told me to do. If You tell me to lay this down..." Sometimes you just have to say, "God, if You want me to stop this, I'll stop it."

If you're not willing to do that, it tells you something right there, doesn't it? Who is the Lord of your life?