

Introduction:

Some time ago, I ate lunch with a couple of preachers. As I ate my heaping plate of Chinese food, one of the brothers asked, "When do we cross the line into materialism?" He then told about someone he knew, describing their house, cars, and vacation trips. He was worried they had become materialistic. The third preacher and I hemmed and hawed trying to sound profound but only said, "We don't really know." As we continued talking, I began to wonder, "When do we cross the line into gossip?" Then, I got up, picked up a second plate at the buffet line and wondered, "When do we cross the line into gluttony?" How many questions like this do we ask? How many times do we wonder, "Where do I draw the line?"

Most of us know what the Scripture explicitly says. We know the Bible condemns greed (**I Corinthians 5:11**). However, it never explicitly draws the line for when a person becomes greedy. We know the Bible says we must not forsake the assembling (**Hebrews 10:25**). However, it never explicitly draws the line for when missing becomes forsaking. We know sexual immorality is completely out of the question (**Hebrews 13:4**). However, the Bible never explicitly draws the line for when physical contact becomes sexually immoral. Where do we draw these lines?

Discussion:

I. The Problem

- A. This problem is not merely academic, trying to find out word definitions and drawing boxes around specified meanings. This problem is potentially soul-shattering because of the nature of sin. **Romans 7:7-24** demonstrates our dire dilemma. As we have learned before, sin distorts, deceives, destroys, and dominates.
- B. Paul said sin distorted God's Law, using it to get him to covet (**Romans 7:8, 11**). It did this by deceiving him (**Romans 7:11**). Sin offers more than it can give and never tells us where it will lead. Through this distortion and deception, sin destroyed Paul, causing him to covet and be separated from God (**Romans 7:9, 11, 13**). Sin was made alive and Paul died. But sin did not stop there. Sin progressed to dominate Paul (**Romans 7:14-24**). He wanted to be content. He decided to be content. He hated coveting. Yet, he still coveted. Notice what he said, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate" (**vs. 15, ESV**). If sin would do this to Paul, what do you think it will do to us? Do not be deceived. If we crack the door for sin even an inch, it will dominate and destroy us.
- C. We rarely think about the ultimate end of our actions when we argue over drawing the lines. We can easily convince ourselves that our little foray into whatever issue is safe.
 1. But understand this: no alcoholic thought her first social drink would lead her to alcoholic domination. Consider Dave. B. whose story is told in *The Big Book*, that is the manual for Alcoholics Anonymous. He did not think his life would be ruined when he took his first drink. He was afraid merely that his school friends would not like him if he did not go along. He had no idea alcohol would get him in an accident that would cost him his toes and fracture his skull. Who knew alcohol would cause a brain hemorrhage that would paralyze half his body. He had no idea alcohol would send him to jail, put him in psychiatric hospitals, cost him his job and almost his family before he finally started the road to recovery.¹
 2. No one addicted to pornography and sex thought their first foray into lust would lead them into slavery. Consider *The Personal Story* told in *The White Book*, that is, the manual for Sexaholics Anonymous. This unnamed man had no idea his lust would destroy his ability to have relationships with other people, including his wife and children, destroying his marriage. He did not know it would ruin his schooling as he studied theology in seminary and cost him his job as an assistant in a local church. He had no idea it would lead him to rely on prostitutes, become a pimp, and put his life in danger from disease as well as criminals. He never guessed he would go so far as to be arrested by the vice squad. He thanked God for this wake-up call and swore off immorality, but was back on the streets looking for another sexual hit as soon as he was released. Where did his descent start? He was born in the 1930s and his nosedive into the

¹ *Alcoholics Anonymous*, 4th ed. New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, Inc. 2001, pp 193-199.

domination of sin began with *Flash Gordon* comics—Azura the scantily clad Queen of Magic destroyed him as a child and he did not even know it until he was an adult.²

- D. Allow me one disclaimer. I am not saying everyone who ever submits to one sip of alcohol or one glimpse of immodesty is destined for sin's domination in these areas. I simply want us to recognize the moving nature of lines. If we do not answer this question well, we won't merely miss a question on a test, we may well destroy our own souls. Granted, I know none of us will completely avoid this domination and death. **Romans 3:23** says we all sin and fall short of God's glory. However, the better we answer these questions of lines when we are young, the better off we will be and the easier it will be to follow Jesus as we grow old.

II. Guideposts on the path

- A. Imagine you can see two paths heading away from you. At your feet, it is hard to distinguish them. As they progress away from you, they start to diverge, but are so close it appears they go to the same place and it looks as though you can easily hop back and forth between them. However, do not be deceived; if you linger long on sin's broad and easy path leading to destruction, you will eventually hit a point of no return. Not that it is impossible to get back to the path of righteousness. However, there will be a point that doing so will take drastic and painful measures that might be like removing an eye or cutting off an arm (cf. **Matthew 5:29-30**). How do we tell these two paths apart, especially when they are still so close they may appear indistinguishable?
- B. I am notoriously bad about getting distracted while driving, especially on long trips. I do not know how many times I have missed turns, made wrong turns, gone the wrong direction on a highway, only to waste an hour on a trip. Therefore, I often wake up out of whatever mental reverie was distracting me to wonder, "Am I going the right way? Am I even on the right road?" I immediately start looking for road signs. I am supposed to be on highway 267 or 136. I start looking for those little signs that identify the highway. I am supposed to be heading west or north. I want to see what direction the signs indicate I am going. If I do not see a sign quickly, I start fearing I missed a turn and wonder if I should double back. These guideposts are important to me. In like manner, I want to share six guideposts as we strive to draw our personal lines and stay on God's path of righteousness. When we wonder on which path we are walking, we can ask these questions to help us determine whether we can keep walking or if we need to double back and get back on the path of righteousness.
1. *Can I do this in the name of the Lord?* **Colossians 3:17** says we must do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to the Father. If Jesus were right here next to us, could we say, "I'm doing this with Your permission and blessing?" Can you drink what you are drinking in Jesus' name? Can you eat what you are eating or as much as you are eating in Jesus' name? Can you look at what you are looking at in Jesus' name? Can you touch what you are touching in Jesus' name? Can you go where you are going in Jesus' name? As you answer this question, remember **Romans 14:23**. If you cannot do what you are doing with absolute conviction of faith that it is right, then stop. If it is not from faith, it is sin.
 2. *Am I pursuing a course of the flesh or following the lead of the Spirit?* **Galatians 5:16-25** presents two warring factions trying to pull us on divergent paths—the flesh and the Spirit. As you walk your path, honestly assess whether your words and deeds correspond or follow the lead of the flesh or the Spirit. Does what you are about to do with your girlfriend or boyfriend fit more in line with love and self-control or immorality and sensuality? Does that lottery ticket you are about to buy fit more in line with love and patience or with covetousness and jealousy? Does that party you are attending fit more in line with joy and goodness or with drunkenness and orgies?
 3. *Am I providing for the lusts of the flesh?* This is an extension of the last guidepost. **Romans 13:14** says we must not make provision for the flesh to gratify its desires or lusts. I once read an interesting definition of lust: "*an attitude demanding that a natural instinct serve unnatural desires.*"³ When I eat food to calm my nerves, overcome boredom, deal with depression, I am demanding a natural instinct serve unnatural desires. That is not why God gave us food. When I drink (especially alcohol) to help me relax, help me socialize, help me escape reality, I am demanding a natural instinct serve unnatural desires. When I desire sexuality in order to deal with stress, forget my troubles, overcome my insecurities, I am demanding a natural instinct serve unnatural desires. Thus, as we consider whether we are following the flesh or the Spirit, we must take this next step and ask if we are pursuing a course that provides for the lusts of our flesh. Are we expecting natural instincts and desires to fulfill ends for which they were never designed?

² *Sexaholics Anonymous*, 5th ed. SA Literature, 1989, pp 9-25.

³ *ibid.* p. 40.

Furthermore, what direction does our action lead? Providing for the lusts of the flesh is not exactly the same as feeding them. It is true that going to the water park or the beach is not the same as actually lusting after a woman. But why are you going? What do you think will happen once you get there? If your defense is merely you have decided you will not lust, how can you guarantee that? Do you remember what we learned from Paul in **Romans 7**? That is exactly the kind of deception sin wants us to heed. When you provide for the lusts of the flesh, do not be surprised when sin deceptively sneaks up and kills you, dominating your life.

4. *What hunger am I filling with this action?* **Matthew 5:6** said those who hunger and thirst for righteousness will be filled. Is the action you are about to take helping you pursue the righteousness for which you hunger? Or is it helping you pursue a hunger for power, fame, money, pleasure? Why are you working so hard for that promotion? Promotions in themselves are not wrong, but if the only hunger you are filling is for prestige and power, you have crossed the line.
5. *Am I professing godliness?* **1 Timothy 4:7-8** claims we should train ourselves for godliness, that is, piety and reverence for God. In **1 Timothy 2:10**, Paul told Timothy to teach women to dress in a way that professes godliness. Am I showing reverence to God with the movie I am about to watch? What about with the song with which I am singing on the radio? Does the joke I am about to tell show reverence, piety, and respect for God? Or are my actions dishonoring. Do not forget: as Christians we wear the name of Christ. Everything we do reflects on Him. Does it honor or dishonor Him?
6. *Do my actions demonstrate I am set apart for holiness and sanctification?* **1 Thessalonians 4:1-8** says God did not call us for impurity but for holiness. His will for us is sanctification. Sanctification means being set apart for holy use. Like the vessels of the Old Testament that were set apart and cleansed to be used in the Temple of God, we are to be cleansed and set apart for God's holy use in this world. Does the way I walk and talk tell people I am set apart for holy use by God? Do my clothes say I am set apart for holy use by God? Do the messages on my clothes say I am set apart for holy use by God? Or do they say I am just like the rest of the world pursuing a course of popularity, prestige, and pleasure?

Conclusion:

Just like when we are on road trips, we have to look for the signs to make sure we are on the right road. Use these questions as guideposts to help you see if you are on God's path of righteousness. Draw these lines well when you are younger and overcoming sin will always be easier for you. Please, do not let sin deceive you. Do not let it draw you in trying to see how far you can go. It will always take you further than you ever expected. Follow these guideposts, make wise decisions, overcome sin.

However, if you have already entered sin's domination, I do not want to leave you without hope. As Paul said in **Romans 7:24-25**, "Wretched man that I am! Who will deliver me from this body of death? Thanks be to God through Jesus Christ our Lord!" (ESV). Jesus can deliver you. Throw yourself on His mercy and grace. Allow Him to live through you. It will not always be easy, but His path leads to life. Get on it today. Be baptized into Christ and into His death, be set free from your sins by His blood (**Romans 6:3-4**).