

“Loopholes”  
by Rom A. Pegram (8/19/18)

If you’ve been with us for a while, you know that we’re closing in on the end of our late-summer worship series called ‘Christian’. One more message on Labor Day weekend and we’ll finish up this series. But today’s message, if you haven’t caught it in your bulletin, is entitled ‘Loopholes’. And it’s titled ‘Loopholes’ because I thought we should talk about ‘loopholes’ today. You know what a loophole is, don’t you? *It’s a way of getting around a rule or a law so that you can get what you want.* And I think this comes naturally to us, if we’re human beings, because I see this phenomenon all over the place. And *it begins when we’re young...*

It’s kind of like those conversations you had with your parents... You know, your mom (or dad) is upset with you and you say something like, *Wait, wait, Mom! You asked me if their parents were going to be home. And I knew that eventually they would be. So when I said ‘Yes, their parents are going to be home’, I meant like eventually. You didn’t ask if their parents were going to be home during the party. So technically, I didn’t lie!* Do you remember those days? We love loopholes, don’t we? And it starts when we’re young. Folks, the reason I bring up loopholes today is this: because...

**CHRISTIANS LOVE LOOPHOLES!** If you’re here and you’re a Christian, I know that you love, love, love loopholes! As a matter of fact, all religious people—regardless of faith—love loopholes!

I’ll never forget one of my earlier trips to the Holy Land. Our bus drive was named *Marwan*—a Muslim man. It was January and our tour overlapped with the Islamic month of *Ramadan*. According to their prophet, Muhammad, if they fasted—as prescribed by the Qur’an, they would have their past sins forgiven. So, generally speaking, all Muslims fast during this month, as prescribed by their holy book—the Qur’an, this being *one of the main pillars of Islam*. And here are the essentials of the fast: 1) Your intention must be to fast from dawn to dusk every day of Ramadan and 2) you must abstain from acts that would nullify the fast...

If you maintain these two essential elements during fasting, then your fast will be valid and accepted. However, Marwan (and many others like him), would spend their whole day—instead of concentrating on their sin and forgiveness—bagging up everything they’d devour after sunset (i.e. food, cigarettes, etc.). Most of the time, as I observed this, he would start eating and smoking before the actual sunset there in Israel. And his response when I asked him about it (nicely) was, ‘Well, the sun’s already set over Mecca!’ (Saudi Arabia—east of there, the birthplace of Muhammad...) In other words, he was hungry—starving for a cigarette too—and he’d found a loophole...

We *all* love loopholes, don’t we? But, Christians are especially fond of loopholes. Let me give you a few examples: If you’ve been connected with the Catholic Church, there’s a great loophole called ‘confession’. You just sin and sin and sin some more ... and then you go and dump it all on the priest ... and there you go; all is well.

And, not to leave anyone out, us Protestants have our own loopholes too, like *1 John 1:9* that says, “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.” And that’s our license to fill up the sin bucket. We could just go home, get on our knees, say I’m sorry, then go back and fill up the sin bucket again... An ingenious loophole that’s been used for years...

Then there are other Christians who have a great system too—a great loophole. They run into something they don’t want to do and they just go, *We don’t believe Jesus actually said that. We don’t believe Paul wrote that. We think this is a result of oral tradition over hundreds of years ... so we disregard that one...*

You see, Christians ask questions like this: How close can I get to sin without actually sinning? Or, How bad can I be and still get away with it? BUT ... Jesus’ followers ask a different set of questions, and we’ll get to that in a few minutes; first, however, I want you to know this: *We’re not alone when it comes to loopholes...*

**THE RELIGIOUS LEADERS OF JESUS’ DAY WERE LOOPHOLE EXPERTS!** Folks, Jesus ran into this all the time: Religious leaders had taken the good law and reduced it to a system that worked for them. *The Pharisees, in particular, were so in love with the commands that they sort of forgot the intent of the Commander.* They were so into this, they had rules to keep people from breaking the rules ... and we do that as well; let me show you...

I can still remember what it was like to sit in the living room, or basement family room, with your arm around your girlfriend ... and you decide to turn the lights off... Then, your mother would come running and say, *Woah! You can’t turn off the lights. We have a rule. Thou shalt not turn off the lights.* And you’re like, *Wait a minute! We turn off the lights in this house all the time. As a matter of fact, you get on to us all the time saying ... turn off the lights, turn off the lights, turn off the lights! And now you’re saying ‘Don’t turn off the lights.’ Please make up your mind...* So, see, parents have rules too ... to keep us from breaking other rules. They didn’t want their kids messing around, so if the lights are kept on ... that will more than likely not happen...

So, the issue isn’t the lights; the issue is messing around, so they have a rule to keep you from breaking the rules... When Jesus showed up, they had hundreds of these kinds of rules ... and over time, it got very confusing which were the original rules and which were the rules to keep you from breaking the rules. Jesus’ response to this should frighten us ... and make us re-think our whole approach to Christianity, especially when it comes to loopholes. Here’s what happens (Matt. 15:1-2):

**“Then some Pharisees and teachers of the law came to Jesus from Jerusalem and asked, <sup>2</sup> ‘Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders?’...”**

Now, the tradition of the elders was this body of information—created long after Moses—that supposedly kept people from breaking the laws. So, the Pharisees said,

*Your disciples don't keep the tradition of the elders.* Not Moses' law now, but the tradition of the elders that we created over time to keep people from breaking Moses' law that God gave him. Let me go on (v. 2)...

**<sup>2</sup> "Why do your disciples break the tradition of the elders? They don't wash their hands before they eat!"**

Now, before all the parents with small children here freak out and say, *This is awesome! I didn't even know this was in the Bible!*, I just want to say that it's not really that kind of hand washing. Initially, the priests—and only the priests—were required to do these kinds of crazy ceremonial washings all the way up to the elbow, so they'd be ceremonially pure. But as time went by, the Pharisees decided these rules should apply to everyone. So, all Jewish people had to do these washings—a part of the tradition of the elders, not Moses' law. So, Jesus pretty much ignores their question and says, *I've got a better one for you...*

**<sup>3</sup> Jesus replied, "And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition?"** He turns it around on them, and they're like, *What are you talking about?*

**<sup>4</sup> For God said, 'Honor your father and mother' and 'Anyone who curses his father or mother must be put to death.'**

Now, aren't you glad we've abandoned that part of the Old Testament? None of us would be here ... which means none of our kids would be either. So, Jesus just throws their question right back at them and he basically says, *You're upset with me for breaking a law you created to keep people from breaking a law. You're breaking the actual law that God gave to begin with!* Then we go to V. 5...

**<sup>5</sup> "But you say..."** Now, Jesus points out what they've done. They've taken theology and they've twisted it to empower them to do the very opposite of what God commanded them to do. (Again, they're all about *commands* ... and not the *Commander!*) They forgot all about the intention of the law; instead, they developed a loophole to work around some inconvenience they saw in the law. And Jesus says:

**<sup>5</sup> But you say that if a man says to his father or mother, 'Whatever help you might otherwise have received from me is a gift devoted to God,' <sup>6</sup> he is not to 'honor his father' with it....**

Now, what in the world does that mean? Let me explain it. Here's what Jesus is saying and what they did. They had this command—to honor their father and mother, which is cool when you're a child or a teenager. But they realize: *Wait a minute; honor your father and mother; that's going to cost me plenty as they get older and I do too.* (Remember, there weren't nursing homes in those days or social security; your social security was found in your family; family took care of family.) So they thought, *Moses didn't say until you're a certain age, or your parents are a certain age—like honoring your parents is indefinite.* So they're like, *Oh, we want to keep the command of God, but*

*we don't want to spend all our money on our aging parents. Some of our parents, they just live on and on. And of course, they would live with them...*

So, they came up with a great idea. There was another law that they could twist into helping them out. It was a law that said they had to dedicate everything they had to God. So, when their aging parents needed someone to help with the rent, they would just say, *Oh Dad, I love you and I'd love to help you out, but I've dedicated everything to God. And so to help you out, I'd be robbing God.* But oh ... they should not have brought this up to Jesus! *Oh Mom, I would love to upgrade where you're living, but you know I can't really afford to, because I've dedicated everything to God and I'd be robbing God if I gave money to you. I need to hold on to what I have, just in case God needs it!* They actually manufactured a rule that would enable them to not support (or honor) their parents without breaking God's law (or so they thought). And here's what Jesus said about that (v. 6b)...

**"...Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition."** But, before we get all high and mighty about the Pharisees, let me tell you ... *we all do this!* We nullify. In other words, we take the unclear and fog up the clear. We prefer to lean on the statement, *I think it might ...and if we just look the right way ...and we just ignore what's in plain sight!* We've all—at one time or another—taken what God's said and twisted it to our advantage. So, what does Jesus think about that? Well, I'm glad you asked. Here's what he says (v. 7)...

<sup>7</sup> **"You hypocrites!"** Wow. That was fun to say. Would you quote this verse with me? On three; one, two, three: "You hypocrites!"

Folks, here's the bottom line—the moral of this story: *Jesus doesn't like it when we use God's word to avoid doing God's will!* That's the bottom line; Jesus doesn't like it! Jesus doesn't like it when we use God's word to find loopholes around doing his Father's will.

The truth is ... Christians do it all the time. We hang around Christians and come to expect this behavior—*viewing the world through the lens of a twisted law and a twisted way of looking at scripture*. It's kind of like those who pick and choose sins. Whatever they're fond of, that's not really a sin anymore. Whatever they feel like speaking the TRUTH about (with no grace), however, those are the sins that count. And pretty soon we forget that ... *all sin is equally offensive to God*. But, we like to pick and choose, don't we? We like to say, *But I've dedicated everything to God, so I don't have to support that...*

So, Jesus shows up, into a world very much like ours, but somewhat worse. And he did a brilliant thing. He pushed back and he said, *Look, forget the commands. I want to talk about the intent of the Commander. Forget all the details for just a moment. I want to take you back to what God had in mind when God first gave Moses the commandments.* And he pulls way back and he says, *Let's start all over...* And he says to his followers (John 13:34a, NIV):

<sup>34</sup> “**A new command I give you: Love one another....**” This is the beginning. This is at the top of the list. I know we’re all busy, but this is the one we need to pay attention to! This is how everyone’s going to know that you’re a follower of Jesus. And you need to love the way Jesus loved. And, folks, it caught on...

And Paul expanded on it when he said (Rom. 13:8-9, NIV): “**Let no debt remain outstanding** [*in other words, pay your debts!*], **except the continuing debt** [*this one you never pay off*] **to love one another....**” In other words, he says, *Hey, Jesus-followers, I want you to wake up every day understanding that you’re in debt to the people around you. You owe it to them to love them! You owe it to them because of the debt you owe your Heaven Father for loving you so much!* And it begins with V. 9...

“**The commandments, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ ‘Do not murder,’ ‘Do not steal,’ ‘Do not covet,’ and whatever other commandment there may be, are summed up in this one rule: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’**”

And the rest of scripture is simply commentary on how it is and what you do ... when you decide to love one another. Folks, **disciples don’t look for loopholes; that’s what Christians do.** Disciples ask: **What does love require of me?** Disciples don’t open up God’s word to see how little they can do. They don’t go, *Honey, the Bible says you’re to submit to me. Na-na-na-na-na-na!* They don’t do that. Disciples don’t say, *Honey, you’re supposed to love me like Christ loved the Church. And you’re not very good at that. Na-na-na-na-na-na!*

Instead, every day a disciple wakes up and asks this question: *What does love require of me today?* What if you tried that for a week? What if we decided to actually do what love requires of us? What if before we sent that email ... or said ‘Honey, come here...’ or ‘Son, sit down...’ or ‘Dad, I don’t want to...’ we actually asked the question: *What does love require of me?*

So *what does love require of us?* On Labor Day weekend, I’m going to tell you ... specifically. It’s going to be awful ... and it’s going to be wonderful! But, for this week, let’s live with the question: *What does love require of me?*