

Looking for Loopholes

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[0 : 00] There's nothing quite like finding a good loophole, is there, that lets you do what you want to do even though you're not supposed to do it.

Listen to some of the more creative uses of loopholes that have made the record books. In 2007, the U.S. state of Minnesota passed a law banning smoking in public places, including in bars and restaurants, which is really bad news for the bars and restaurants.

But the owners of one bar, they were quite clever. They found a way around this rule because that law regarding the banning of smoking in public places had certain exceptions, certain small prints, such as that actors in a play or a movie were allowed to smoke as part of their act if they were in character.

And so the bar declared that they were staging a continuous live performance and all of their customers were actors in a play. And the law could do nothing to them. It allowed their customers to circumvent the rules.

And before long, no doubt, that bar was the most popular around. How about this one? Not long ago, also in America, in fact, a man named Kenneth Robinson, a picture of him will be up behind me, managed to buy a house, that house over there, which is worth \$330,000.

[1 : 20] And he bought it for no more than \$16. And he did this by studying the laws concerning house foreclosures and discovered that according to the rules, if an owner abandoned a house and his mortgage that he was using to pay off the house, and at the same time, the mortgage company closed down.

And in that case, if squatters moved into the abandoned house, the original owner could only get the squatters out by paying off the original mortgage, which in this case never happened.

And add to this that the fact that this happened in Texas, whose occupancy laws state that if someone stays in an abandoned house for three years without anyone claiming it, ownership transfers to the occupant, all they've got to do is fill out a form and post it for the cost of \$16. Which is exactly what Kenneth Robinson did. He declared himself a squatter, and so for the price of just sending off some paperwork, he's the owner of a brand new house.

Of course, this doesn't only happen in the USA, and it doesn't only happen in the legal world, as the underarm bowling incident of 1981 proved. When Australia were playing New Zealand in a one-day international cricket match, New Zealand were batting, and they needed six runs off the final ball.

[2 : 33] And so the Australian bowler decided to roll the last delivery on the ground to make it impossible to hit a six. And of course, since that incident, as I understand, the rules have been changed.

But at the time, it was totally legal and typical of Australians. No, sorry, I shouldn't have said that. And people find loopholes not only in sports and in law, but in politics.

Right here in South Africa, as we saw on Thursday night, when the EFF's MPs found a loophole in the parliamentary rules to try to derail the president's state of the nation speech.

You see, people always like looking for loopholes, don't they? And it's no different when it comes to obeying God. Ever since people have known God's requirements of them, they've been trying to find loopholes.

There's ways that we could do what we wanted and still tick the box. You see, we are natural loophole finders. And we see this in Romans, the passage that Nick read for us earlier.

[3 : 33] Because the Jews of Paul's day had thought that they had found a loophole in God's laws that allowed them to live how they wanted and still be safe from judgment. And it's in our passage that Paul addresses this supposed loophole head on.

And he shows how there's no getting around God's laws over us. There's no loopholes whether you're a Jew or whether you're a Christian. No matter who you are. And so what was this loophole the Jews were appealing to?

Well, we've first got to understand, to understand what Paul's talking about here. We've got to understand that the Jews were different to all other nations. Because it was through them that God chose to reveal himself and his laws as a way to communicate with the rest of the world.

The Israel, the Jewish nation, was effectively meant to be an embassy of heaven for the rest of the world to come and hear God. And Paul affirms as much. Look at verse 1.

He says, What advantage then is there to being a Jew? Or what value is there in circumcision? Much in every way. First of all, the Jews have been entrusted with the very words of God.

[4 : 38] And so because the Jews were in this position, a unique position amongst the whole world, that they had been entrusted with God's word, they had a very special relationship with God that other nations didn't have.

It's what we call a covenant. They had a covenant with God, an agreement that God made with these people that had certain privileges and responsibilities and had promises from God to be faithful to his covenant with the Jewish people.

But unfortunately, as we page through our Old Testament, what we see time and time again is that Israel didn't do their job. They constantly turned away from God to live their own way. And they became really no different to the other nations around them.

But the problem was, unlike the other nations, they had this covenant with God. And they saw that as a kind of a loophole. Because God promised in the covenant to be faithful to them, they thought they had a get-out-of-jail-free card.

And so Paul responds to this idea. Have a look at verse 3. He says, What if some were unfaithful? Will their unfaithfulness nullify God's faithfulness?

[5 : 50] Not at all. So in other words, what he's saying is, If God punishes Jews for their sin, will that mean that he's breaking his covenant? He's breaking his agreement with them?

No, not at all. For the simple reasons that God's judgment is not because he's unfaithful, but because, Jews, you're unfaithful, Paul says. And in fact, by judging you, God is doing exactly what he said he'd do in the covenant.

And so, what Paul's trying to say here to the Jews is that it would be unfaithful of God not to punish you. So he's turning it over on its head. And that's something that the Jews forgot.

And they desperately needed to hear. They thought that God being faithful meant God letting them off. But that's not what God being faithful means at all.

See, God being faithful means God always doing what he's promised to do. Not just in blessing people, but also in punishing people.

[6 : 53] And we should never forget that. Like the Jews forgot that. We, as Christians, should never forget that when we talk about God's faithfulness, it doesn't only mean that which will benefit us.

But it says faithfulness in being just as well. You know, we sang, Great is thy faithfulness earlier. That word, that phrase has much deeper meaning than we might think. You know, sometimes you find those promise boxes.

I don't know if you've ever come across promise boxes. They're little plastic or wooden boxes with cards that list promises of God from Scripture. So you take a card in the morning or whenever it is in the day when you need a bit of encouragement, and you read one of God's promises.

Now, those boxes, I have nothing against them. They're great, but they're incomplete. Because they only list the promises of God's blessing. He also promised to judge.

And those are promises you don't find in the promise boxes. I mean, who'd want to start their day with, In the fire of my wrath, the whole earth will be consumed. But that's a promise that God will nonetheless keep.

[7 : 54] And we've got to remember, He won't just put aside His promises to judge the world. You see, the point that Paul's trying to make in this section is that God is always totally just.

God is just. And that is what we've got to understand here. God is just in that there are no loopholes around His justice for any of us. You know, last week we learned God does not show favoritism, and all people will be judged fairly according to what they've done.

That's what the passage last week made clear. And what's more, this is what we see this week.

Everyone is going to agree that God's judgment is just. Even those being judged are going to know

that it's right.

And we see this because Paul quotes Psalm 51 to make the point, which was a psalm of David confessing his sin of adultery with Bathsheba, and the subsequent arranging for her husband to be killed.

David realized after a while that what he had done was completely wrong. And in his confession, which is in Psalm 51, he says this to God, which Paul quotes.

[9 : 06] He says that you may be proved right when you speak and prevail when you judge. Or more literally, you are right in your verdict and you are justified when you judge. That's what David the accused is saying to God the judge.

And you see, the incredible thing when God judges people is that even those people being judged know that it's right. Because we all deep down have a sense that wrongdoing must be punished, even our own wrongdoing, don't we?

We try to get away from it. We try to ignore it. But we all know that what we do wrong must be punished. Psychiatrists often see this in cases of people who have done something wrong, but they just can't forgive themselves for it.

And what they tend to find, these psychiatrists, is that their patients subconsciously punish themselves. This guilt is just eating away at them. And to respond to that guilt, the only thing they do subconsciously, the only thing they can do, is punish themselves.

Hurt themselves, whether it's disfiguring their body or deliberately staying in an abusive relationship. Whatever it is, people subconsciously punish themselves when they've done something wrong.

[10 : 19] And it's behavior that's rooted in a deep down feeling that we all have, that what we do wrong deserves to be punished. We can't get away from that fact. We can't shake off our guilt without punishment.

Of course, some people suppress that feeling quite well. Hardened criminals, whatever it is. But on the day when God judges all people and brings punishment, He will be doing something that everyone on that day knows to be totally just and right, even those being punished.

And so God will be seen to be right, just, and glorious on that day, even when people are facing His judgment. But that anticipates another loophole, which is interesting, which Paul goes on to describe in verse 5.

Listen to this next loophole from verse 5. But if our unrighteousness brings out God's righteousness more clearly, what shall we say? That God is unjust in bringing His wrath on us?

I'm using a human argument. So Paul is telling us that this is another argument, another common idea that kind of went like this. Okay, this is how the idea went. Ah, wait a minute, Paul. If God is judging us and that glorifies Him, then our sin is ultimately leading to a good result.

[11 : 37] And so how can God punish us for it if it's glorifying Him? That would be unfair. Ah, Paul got you. You see, that was the argument. But Paul will have none of it. But, he says in verse 6, certainly not.

If that were so, how could God judge the world? In other words, that's just stupid. Okay? Because sin is sin and must be judged by its very nature. Even if it has a good result, the ends don't justify the means.

Sin is never justified. In any case, God will still judge it. And that's the point that Paul's trying to hammer home to these self-righteous Jews and self-righteous Christians and self-righteous people of any belief today.

That nobody can get away with their sins. Nobody. Because God is completely just. There's no escape from that justice. There's no loopholes. There's no get-out-of-jail-free cards.

You know, and just like we expect that of human judges to be just and not let people off, how much more should we expect the judge of the universe to ensure that every single sin, no matter how small, is rightly punished?

[12 : 43] He would be unjust to do anything else. So, we don't like that idea of God judging, but actually, deep down, we want him to. Because he would be unjust if he didn't.

And that is the truth about the God who is our God. The true God. He is a God who never sweeps sin under the carpet. He is completely just.

And you know what? That should be a huge comfort to us, shouldn't it? If we think about it. Where criminals prosper. A world where tyrannical dictators rule with impunity.

Even though every now and again they trip on a red carpet to ensure us that justice still prevails. But in a world where so much injustice is done, it's a huge relief to know that one day everybody will answer for what they've done.

They will give an account for all they've done wrong and will be justly punished for that. You can know that for sure because our God is just. One writer says this, and I quote, The doctrine of judgment gives meaning to life.

[13 : 45] Judgment means that history moves to a goal. Judgment means that evil will be disposed of authoritatively, decisively, finally. Judgment means that in the end God's will will be perfectly done.

And that should be a great comfort to us. But it's at this point now in the passage. Where we're all going, yay, good, God's going to bring justice.

Paul now brings down the hammer and reminds us that God's justice shouldn't encourage us as much as it should scare us. Because we are more sinful than we ever thought. And that's what he goes on to explain to us.

Paul hammers that home, that idea of our sin. You see, so he's very clever because he raises this idea of God's judgment. He proves that God is totally just. And then he turns immediately to us and says, but look at yourself.

Okay, what does that mean for you? Look at verse 10. Paul is from here quoting a whole lot of verses from the Jews' very own scriptures, the Old Testament, to help them and us to realize the situation we're actually in.

[14 : 47] And it's in these verses that he sums up what we've been looking at over the past few weeks, his points that he's been making. From verse 10, as it is written, Listen, there is no one righteous.

Not even one. There is no one who understands. There is no one who seeks God. All have turned away. They have together become worthless. There is no one who does good. Not even one.

Their throats are open graves. Their tongues practice deceit. The poison of vipers is on their lips.

Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness. Their feet are swift to shed blood.

Ruin and misery mark their ways. And the way of peace they do not know. There is no fear of God before their eyes. Now, it sounds like he's talking about really bad people, right?

These verses must describe like those really bad kind of dictators and murderers. But the shocking thing is that these verses describe us.

[15 : 42] That's what he's using them for. These verses describe every human being. And the point that they make is that every part of us is affected by sin.

And we can't get away from that. Notice how many different body parts are mentioned in these verses. Throats, tongues, lips, mouths, feet, eyes.

And each of these body parts contribute in their own way to our sin. Tongues practice deceit. Our words are never totally honest, are they?

I mean, from childhood we've trained ourselves to hide the truth when necessary from certain people. Poison is on our lips. It sounds harsh. But it's saying that we're always ready to hurt someone with our words, which we so often do, don't we?

Feet, swift to shed blood. The way of peace they do not know. You know, you only have to open up our newspapers to see how humans are incapable of being at peace with each other, even in our own parliament.

[16 : 46] And that's because the sin that resides in all of us, in every part of us. And it literally comes out in all of our body parts.

We can't contain it. No matter how much we try. There is no part of us that is free from sin. And it's a doctrine that theologians call the doctrine of total depravity.

And that's a phrase that describes each one of us. And, you know, the word total depravity, I mean, you imagine some kind of hunchback person with drool coming out of his mouth.

But that's not what total depravity means. It doesn't mean that we're all as bad as we could be. And the reason for that is that God, in his grace, has put things in place to restrain our sin.

Things like our conscience. Things like our government. Our police force. Our justice system. Our gifts from God to restrain people's sin. And it's because of those things that we're not always as bad as we could be.

[17 : 42] But total depravity does mean that every part of us is under the power of sin. So that without all of these restraints, we would descend into complete wickedness.

As we see in states of anarchy where the rule of law has failed. Or in mob justice, which is so evil. And yet people think it's so justified. I saw a photograph not long ago.

It was a very disturbing photograph. A black and white photograph. Taken in the U.S. in the 50s. And it was a photograph of a lynching. And the burning of a man who was suspected of a crime. It's a famous photo. But what shocked me about this is when I looked at the photo, there was this mob posing for the photo. Smiles on their face. And a burning corpse in front of them.

And what fascinated me is that in the crowd were women and children. Who were dressed in totally normal clothes. Probably the clothes they would wear to church on Sunday.

[18 : 45] And they looked like totally decent people. And yet they were smiling as they murdered a man. Women and children. And it could have been any of us. Given the situation.

You see, without the restraints that God gives us, that's what we would be. That's what we would tend towards. Whether we like to think of ourselves as decent or not.

That's what the Bible says we would naturally tend towards. Why do we never have to teach a child to do bad? Why do we only have to teach a child to do good? I mean, any parents will know this.

Well, it's because we naturally tend to do wrong. We don't naturally tend to do right. Which proves that we are the people that these verses describe. And so we have a big problem.

I'm sorry to depress you over and over again. But I've got to be faithful to the word. We have a big problem. And it's these two facts. That God is totally just.

[19 : 42] And he will judge all sin. And also that we are totally sinful. Much more than we tend to think. And those two facts seem to be completely irreconcilable. And they should scare us.

And what's much worse is that, we're reminded this morning, there are no loopholes. There is no getting around these facts. We can't, you know, there's no way we can in and of ourselves escape God's judgment.

Not even by doing what God tells us to do in his law. It's too late even for that. Because listen to verse 19.

Now we know that whatever the law says, it says to those who are under the law. So that every mouth may be silenced and the whole world held accountable to God.

Therefore, no one will be declared righteous in God's sight by the works of the law. Rather, through the law we become conscious of our sin. You see what this is saying? The law will never justify us.

[20 : 44] Being good will never justify us. It's too late for that. It doesn't make up for the sins that we've already committed, which are in the thousands of thousands already for each of us, I'm sure.

I mean, think of it. How many times this past week do you think you've done something that you know was wrong? Think back. Four? Five?

Ten maybe? If you're honest. Maybe more. And what about the hidden sins that you never noticed? So maybe that would up the number to 20, and that's a very conservative estimate.

It's probably much more than that. But imagine, let's just for argument's sake say 20 sins that you've committed, things you know I've done that were wrong that God doesn't want you to do.

That's 80 per month.

That's 960 per year. By the age of 40, that's 38,400 sins that you've committed against a holy and just God, your creator, without even thinking twice.

[21 : 39] 38,400, and it's probably much worse than that. Even if you never broke his law again, all those sins must still face his perfect justice. And you can't undo them.

You can't go back and change them. You see, keeping God's law can never justify us. In fact, it was only ever meant to show us how big our problem really is.

That's why God gave people his law, not to justify them, to show them that they're sinners. You know, it's when we look at God's law that we realize all the stuff we should be doing, but we don't.

It's when we look at God's law that we realize all the stuff that we shouldn't be doing, but we do. You know, the law, those 10 commandments up there on the wall, God's law summarized, that is meant to silence our mouth.

We're not supposed to look at that and go, okay, I'm going to try to do those this week. As much as we're supposed to look at those and go, wow, I need a savior. I'm in trouble. That's what the law is supposed to do.

[22 : 36] It's meant to silence our mouths. Verse 19, that every mouth may be silenced. It's the picture of a courtroom that Paul is drawing on. You know, all the evidence in this courtroom is presented, and it is so strong that even when the defendant is now given a chance at the end to defend himself to say something, he's got nothing to say because the evidence is that strong against him.

You know, those commandments, they are meant to silence our mouths, meant to make us realize that we can't justify ourselves. And remember that every time you look at them. Because it's only then, when we look at those and we say, I can't keep them, it's only then that we will look out for the one who can justify us. And that's exactly what God wants us to do. He wants our mouths to be stopped. He wants us to stop trying to justify ourselves, and he wants us to turn and see the savior that he's provided for us. His son, Jesus Christ, who came to take our punishment for us, our just punishment in our place. And only he could do that because of who he was. He was the only one who could take your 38,400 sins, or probably much more.

[23 : 58] He was the only one who could take those, so that, you know, those sins that you know must be punished, you know deep down those sins can't just be swept under the carpet. He took them on himself when he died on the cross.

He was justly punished in your place. And when he died on the cross, you know what we see when we look at that? We realize that God leaves no sin unpunished.

God does not leave your sin unpunished. Even the smallest sin. There is no loopholes around God's justice. But on Jesus, he's already punished the sins of all who are in him through faith. You see, God doesn't go against his justice. He fulfills his justice in his son, Jesus Christ. And so that if you are one of those people who are in Christ through faith, you can know that your sins haven't been swept under the carpet.

And you know what? That is a great comfort. To know that when I've done something wrong, that is going to be, it has already been judged. It hasn't been swept under the carpet. Justice has been done.

[25 : 03] That your sins have been punished, but you have been spared at the same time. That is the cross of Jesus Christ. That is what this church exists to make known to all those people out there who don't care.

Because they need, they need that salvation more than they know. And when you know that, when you know that your sins have been punished, and you have been spared, and you are totally right with God through Jesus Christ, then you can join David in Psalm 51.

And you can say his words, not only, for I know my transgressions, and my sin is always before me. You are right to judge. But you can also say, have mercy on me, O God, according to your unfailing love, according to your great compassion, blot out my transgressions, wash away all my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin.

And you can know that in Jesus, God has already done that. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we're reminded again from your word this morning how much more sinful we are than we thought. And we're reminded as well the truth that you are so just, and you are so holy, and so perfect. And Lord, there is, who, O Lord, could save themselves?

[26 : 30] Who, O Lord, could heal their souls? We can't. But we know that Jesus can. Lord, we thank you for the gospel of Jesus Christ. We pray, Lord, that you would help us to speak out to those who we see and rub shoulders with in the coming week that so desperately need the gospel of Jesus because they are going to face your perfect holy judgment with no excuse.

We do pray, Lord, that you would help us to find opportunities, give us opportunities, to share Christ, to show people that you have made a way, that you've healed the great divide, and that you have brought us to yourself.

And help us, Lord, to walk in light of that this week, to honor you, to do what we know we should do through the power of Jesus. And we pray this in his name alone. Amen.