



## INTRODUCTION

We all try to get around rules, to find and exploit wiggle room. Whether at work, home, or in our spiritual lives, we're always looking for a loophole. Christians love loopholes. Some Catholics use the confessional to do whatever they want on Saturday night and then trap God in his promise of forgiveness come Sunday morning. For many protestants, their version of the confessional is **1 John 1:9**: *If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.* Super-liberal Christians create loopholes by picking and choosing what they believe Jesus said or the apostle Paul wrote. If anything in the Bible gets in the way of what they want, they just ignore it.

Loopholes like the confessional, reading Bible passages out of context, or ignoring challenging passages of Scripture allow us to keep the letter of the law while ignoring its spirit. Loophole Christians ask, "How close can I get to sin without actually sinning?" But Jesus didn't mean for his followers to game the system. He meant for them to trust God and love one another.

## WEEKLY READING

The religious leaders of Jesus' time were obsessed with rules...and with finding loopholes to skirt them when they became inconvenient. They complain to Jesus that his disciples violate tradition by not washing their hands properly before meals (**Matthew 15:1-2**). They were trying to make Jesus look bad by catching his followers in a technicality (the rule about hand washing wasn't God's rule—the religious leaders invented it in order to prevent themselves from violating God's rules).

## WEEKLY READING (Continued)

*Jesus replied, “And why do you break the command of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, ‘Honor your father and mother’ and ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’ But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is ‘devoted to God,’ they are not to ‘honor their father or mother’ with it. Thus you nullify the word of God for the sake of your tradition. (Matthew 15:3–6)*

Jesus pointed out the religious leaders were exploiting a loophole that was far more serious than not washing your hands before eating. Their culture expected them to care for their aging parents. They avoided that responsibility by claiming devoting the money they would have used to care for their parents to God. According to Jesus, this amounted to putting their tradition (rules they’d made up themselves) ahead of the spirit of God’s rules. God had told them to their parents (**Exodus 20:12**). He hadn’t qualified that command in any way.

Many right-wing churches use God’s word to justify “taking back America” politically, while many left-wing churches filter Scripture through their ideology in order to declare how we all should think about government welfare programs or immigration policy. Each side picks and chooses which parts of God’s Word they want to emphasize. By doing so, they submit Scripture to their own wills instead of submitting themselves to God’s will.

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Are you a stickler for the rules or a rule-breaker? How did that play out in your childhood?
2. Which parts of the Bible are you most tempted to ignore? Why?

## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS (Continued)

3. We're all guilty in one way or another of looking for religious loopholes. How have you caught yourself using God's words to avoid doing his will?
4. It's human nature to apply rules to other people more than we do to ourselves. How does Jesus' command for us to love one another challenge that tendency?
5. Is there someone you're currently judging for the rules he or she breaks? How can you do a better job of loving that person?

## MOVING FORWARD

Jesus entered a world full of loopholes and did a brilliant, radical thing. He basically said, Forget all the commands. I want to talk about the commander. He urged his followers to obey God from their hearts rather than taking advantage of loopholes.

*"A new command I give you: Love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another." (John 13:34)*

His command to love took hold among his followers in the first century. When they would gather together, they were driven by love for one another. It became the filter through which they made every decision.

Following Jesus means having no loopholes. His command to love is too simple, too direct to be ignored, avoid, or taken out of context.

## CHANGING YOUR MIND

*Let no debt remain outstanding, except the continuing debt to love one another, for whoever loves others has fulfilled the law. The commandments, “You shall not commit adultery,” “You shall not murder,” “You shall not steal,” “You shall not covet,” and whatever other command there may be, are summed up in this one command: “Love your neighbor as yourself.”*

**Romans 13:8–9**