

“Looking for Loopholes”

Romans 6:1–23

Looking for loopholes

Kerry Packer. There's a little bit of cheekiness in all of us. We like to find loopholes, often legal, and we like to exploit them. Taxation is the classic example. As Kerry Packer (*slide*) once said in 1991 to a parliamentary enquiry:

Last year I suffered a major heart attack and died. I didn't die for long but it was long enough for me. I didn't come back to control John Fairfax. I didn't come back to break the law. And I certainly didn't intentionally come back to testify before a parliamentary inquiry.

I am not evading tax in any way, shape or form. Of course, I am minimising my tax. Anybody in this country who does not minimise his tax wants his head read. I can tell you as a government that you are not spending it so well that we should be donating extra.

Legal tax loopholes.

David Phillips (slide). In 1999 an engineer in the United States noticed that if he cashed in 10 bar codes from his Healthy Choice Frozen Meal he'd earn 1,000 frequent flyer miles. Get enough of those bar codes and the airline lets you fly for free.

Being an engineer he did some sums and realised he could buy a cheaper Healthy Choice product, a pudding, and accumulate bar codes for less money and quicker. So he went out and bought 12,150 cups of pudding and to avert suspicion at the stores he told them he was buying up big for the Y2K bug.

Healthy Choice at first resisted the claim but all the same ended up forking over the 1.25 million flyer miles to Phillips.

Not only that, Phillips also got the Salvation Army to peel off most of the barcodes for him, in exchange for donating the pudding—which earned him an \$800 tax deduction on top of everything else. For around two thousand bucks, David Phillips and his family found the loopholes in the promotion and have been flying free for years.

The Bible. When it comes to reading the Bible, people are very good at looking for loopholes. They have all sorts of reasons for doing so, most often to challenge the authority of the text—particularly passages about creation, the flood, prophecy, miracles including the virgin birth—most of the Bible it seems.

But people who think theologically are also good at looking for Bible loopholes in the interests of doing less to please God more. Or in desperation to somehow see that God approves of ungodly choices. It's a plea to God to allow me to keep on sinning, or at the least he should accommodate my unwise choices.

A remarkable number of Bible readers proof-text passages to make them mean anything they choose to make them mean. It's in our nature to try and justify sin by looking for loopholes in God's word.

It's this desire to justify sin or excuse sin which takes into Romans 6 this morning.

Sin is seductive and promises so much which makes it difficult to give it up. Is it possible to be a Christian and still live the way I want to live? Can I love God and still enjoy the pleasures of my old sinful self? Churches in the 1st century are so much like our churches in the 21st century. We do not disengage from sin easily. It's tempting to look for loopholes that justify sinful thoughts and actions.

Two gospel “loopholes”. In Rom 6 Paul considers two arguments which sound like gospel loopholes. They sound like flaws in God's wonderful gospel plan. The first comes in verse 1. If sinning gives God the opportunity to display his grace, then why not keep sinning so God can show more of his grace?

It's good for God and good for us. Everyone's a winner.

And then, second, in verses 15, another apparent gospel loophole. The gospel assure us that we no longer live under the condemnation of the law. We've shifted systems. We're no longer “in Adam” but “in Christ”. There is no condemnation for those in Christ Jesus. Since this is so, the argument goes, let's keep on sinning because Christ has satisfied the law on our behalf and the punishment is gone.

Does not grace set us free—free to even sin without reprisal?

Let's look at how Paul responds to each of these suggestions.

Answering the first misunderstanding. Verse 1, "What shall we say, then? Shall we go on sinning so that grace may increase?" Isn't sinning the best thing we can do to enhance God's reputation? Then he'll forgive us, and if we sin even more, he'll keep forgiving us even more. In this way, God can show how majestic and generous and kind and patient he really is.

What a wonderful thing for God and what a wonderful thing for us! It's as though our sin is doing God a favour!

How's does Paul reply to this suggestion? He responds by explaining the gospel. He unpacks the saving work of Christ. He returns to the victory of the cross and the triumph of the resurrection. What should we do when confronted with a similar tempting ideas? We should do what Paul does. We think our issue through in the light of the gospel.

How does Paul think this particular issue in the light of the gospel? He tells us in verses 2 to 14.

Paul never loses sight of the implications of the death of Christ and his resurrection. Verse 4. We were buried with Christ, and as he was raised from the dead to new life, so are we. Verse 5, "If we have been united with him like this in his death, we will certainly also be united with him in his resurrection". Verse 8, "Now if we died with Christ, we believe that we will also live with him". Verse 10, "The death he died, he died to sin once for all; but the life he lives, he lives to God".

Paul holds the death and resurrection of Christ together because it is their combined achievement, and our participation in this achievement, that makes deliberately sinning a nonsense.

Let's have a closer look at the detail.

First, Paul says we participate into Christ's death. Paul establishes the link between Christ and ourselves. Verse 3, "Or don't you know that all of us who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were therefore buried with him through baptism into death".

When we were justified by faith we were baptised into Christ Jesus which brought us into union with his death. Paul uses the picture of baptism to describe our union in Christ which is exactly what he says in verse 5, "We are united with him in his death".

We died to sin because we were baptised into Christ's death. God immerses us in Christ's death. We are buried with him and alongside him. We share the finality of Christ's death. Our death is no ordinary death because it is connected by faith to Christ's not so ordinary death.

What is it that Christ's death achieves for us?

Verses 6 and 7 give a clear explanation, "For we know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be done away with, that we should no longer be slaves to sin— because anyone who has died has been freed from sin".

Christ died to rid us of our sinful nature. So any argument that promotes sinning conflicts with the gospel. Christ died to free us from slavery of sin. It is not possible to live in Egypt while enjoying the blessings of the Promised Land. Either one lives in slavery or one lives in freedom. Either one lives in Christ or one lives outside Christ. Either one is dead to sin or alive in sin.

When God justified us by faith we died to sin. How can we live in it any longer? And we can't die to sin and later reverse things later down the track. Verse 10 puts this thought to death, "The death he died, he died to sin once for all".

There was a Christian sticker a few years ago that read, "Christians aren't perfect, just forgiven". And some took this to mean that forgiven people can sin as much as they want too. But the thing about death is that is really is death. It's the cessation of the old ways. We died to sin because we died in and with Christ. We participate in his death and there is no turning back. Our friendship with sin has ended.

Second, Paul says we participate into Christ's resurrection. The old has gone and in the resurrection of Christ the new has come. Verses 4 and 8. Christ's resurrection gives us life. What does this life look like? The end of verse 10, "... the life Christ lives, he lives to God".

The resurrection doesn't give us any old life. It gives us Christ's life. It gives us a life dead to sin and a life under the rule of God. We move from being "in Adam" to "in Christ". We move from one kingdom to another kingdom. We move from darkness to light, from slavery to freedom.

It's not like moving home which Janette and I did last weekend. With blood and sweat, and help from friends, we managed to pack our bags and take our possessions from one home to another home. But only the roof over our head changed. We are still the same old people. (I use the word "old" very carefully),

Shifting humanities is far more profound than packing a few suit cases and moving up the road. A shift from being "in Adam" to "in Christ" is a shift in worlds. It's shifting allegiances. It's shifting natures. It's a profound change in who we are as people. Dead to sin and a new creation.

This is Paul's rebuttal. "Shall we go on sinning so that grace will abound? By no means!" When we shine the gospel on the prospect of condoning sin, we see what a stupidity it is. To be sure we get it, Paul teases us the implications in verses 11 to 14 with some commands which practically apply gospel truths.

Verses 11 to 12, "In the same way, count yourselves dead to sin but alive to God in Christ Jesus. Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body so that you obey its evil desires". Did you miss this? Verse 13, "Do not offer the parts of your body to sin, as instruments of wickedness, but rather offer yourselves to God, as those who have been brought from death to life; and offer the parts of your body to him as instruments of righteousness". Summary, verse 14, "For sin shall not be your master, because you are not under law, but under grace".

A justice of the peace was conducting his first wedding in a small English village. After he had the knot securely tied, the young couple continued to stand before him as if expecting something further to happen. He didn't know what to say as the couple stood there looking at him. So he blurted out, ""There, there, it's all over! Go and sin no more!"

"There, there. It's all over. Christ has saved you. You are justified by faith. Go and sin no more!" And when you do sin in your body of sin yet to be redeemed, remember 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".

You no longer live under the condemnation of the law, but under the grace of God. Verse 14. Not under law, but grace. And this is a marvellous position to be in but one which could be misunderstand. Since living “under grace” excuses us from the condemnation of the law, then why not keep on sinning?

Answering the second misunderstanding. Verse 15, “What then? Shall we sin because we are not under law but under grace”? Perhaps sin can be justified another way. Once we were in Adam under the law but now we are in Christ. Now we are living under grace where there is no condemnation.

Does God’s abundant grace allow us to sin?

This misunderstanding is very similar to the first one as each question probes whether or not God’s grace gives us the freedom to sin. So what Paul has said previously applies to this second proposition. But this time Paul develops his answer in terms of where we spend our energy. Now that we are saved, whom should we off our lives too?

Verse 16, “Don’t you know that when you *offer yourselves* to someone to obey him as slaves, you are slaves to the one whom you obey—whether you are slaves to sin, which leads to death, or to obedience, which leads to righteousness”? Verse 19, “Just as you used to *offer the parts of your body* in slavery to impurity and to ever-increasing wickedness, so now *offer them* in slavery to righteousness leading to holiness”.

To whom are you offering your life?

Those wonderful people who helped us move home offered themselves to us. They spent their energy working for us. For a day they dropped all else and helped us pack, move and unpack. Two ladies offered to cook meals.

This is Paul’s point in these verses 16 to 23. All the energy and passion that was once offered to impurity and wickedness needs to be redirected, it needs to be channelled in a gospel direction. N.T. Wright paraphrases verse 19 like this (slide), “Just as you presented your limbs and organs as slaves to uncleanness, so now present them to God as slaves to his covenant purposes”.

We are no longer slaves to sin but slaves to righteousness. It sounds odd that our freedom in Christ can be explained in terms of our slavery to righteousness. For the freedom we have in Christ is not a freedom to do anything we wish.

When we passed our driving test and we earned the “freedom of the road”, this did not mean we are free to drive on the wrong side, ignore stop signs and behave like a “pork-chop” anytime we want too.

Since we no longer live under law but under grace, our energy is to be directed toward living in righteousness. We are slaves to righteousness. Freedom is not a moral vacuum. It’s the freedom to live in allegiance to Christ. As new creation we want to live under the rule of Christ. It’s not a law, it’s not a rule. It’s not a hardship to be endured. It’s an inner desire, as we see in verse 17, to “wholeheartedly obey the form of teaching to which you were entrusted”.

There really are two ways to live. Under law, offering yourself to sin and the prospect of certain death. Or under grace. Living as slaves of righteousness. Knowing the freedom in Christ that we see in verse 22 produces, “holiness, and the result is eternal life”. There really are two ways to live. “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord”.

Conclusion. What God has given us in Christ is nothing less than complete and utter transformation. The old self, in Adam, has been put to death, and we have risen with Christ to be a new creation.

And as we war with our old sinful natures, never be tempted to give in. There is never a reason to excuse sin. We can never justify ungodly behaviour. “For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Rom 3.23).