



SMALL GROUP STUDY GUIDE

Week 4 March 12, 2023
“Loophole Religion”

OPENING PRAYER

Heavenly Father, thank you for your love, your mercy, and your grace. You are great and worthy of our praise and service. Father, you call us to love others as you have loved us through your Son, but as you know, we don't always get this right. For the times we elevate human tradition over your commands and hurt others, we are sorry and ask for your forgiveness. Help us to see when we become religious hypocrites and then teach us to turn from our actions and follow you and your command to love others. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.

SCRIPTURE PASSAGES

Mark 7:1-13 (NIV)

The Pharisees and some of the teachers of the law who had come from Jerusalem gathered around Jesus² and saw some of his disciples eating food with hands that were defiled, that is, unwashed.³ (The Pharisees and all the Jews do not eat unless they give their hands a ceremonial washing, holding to the tradition of the elders.⁴ When they come from the marketplace they do not eat unless they wash. And they observe many other traditions, such as the washing of cups, pitchers and kettles.)

⁵So the Pharisees and teachers of the law asked Jesus, “Why don’t your disciples live according to the tradition of the elders instead of eating their food with defiled hands?”

⁶He replied, “Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you hypocrites; as it is written:

*“These people honor me with their lips,
but their hearts are far from me.*

*⁷They worship me in vain;
their teachings are merely human rules.’*

⁸You have let go of the commands of God and are holding on to human traditions.”

⁹And he continued, “You have a fine way of setting aside the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions!¹⁰ For Moses said, ‘Honor your father and mother,’ and, ‘Anyone who curses their father or mother is to be put to death.’¹¹ But you say that if anyone declares that what might have been used to help their father or mother is Corban (that is, devoted to God)—¹² then you no longer let them do anything for their father or mother.¹³ Thus you nullify the word of God by your tradition that you have handed down. And you do many things like that.”

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INTRODUCTION

From an early age, we learn quickly to look for loopholes in the rules. We try to figure out what we can get away with and still be okay. We tend to take this same mindset into our relationship with God, but it doesn't work. When we opt for loopholes and workarounds, we find ourselves in a category no one wants to be in: hypocrites. Jesus calls us to move beyond loophole religion.

Loophole religion is pervasive in our culture, but following Jesus is an invitation to be done with all the games and traditions. We are part of a kingdom of conscience informed by the law of Christ: to love others as God through Christ has loved us. There are no loopholes in that kind of love—no workarounds. In this kingdom, we wake up every day with the question: What does love require of me?

QUESTIONS

1. Did you grow up with any religious traditions that, looking back, made God seem small and petty?
2. Are you inclined to believe that confessing your sin to God makes things right between you and God, regardless of whether or not you've made things right with the person you sinned against? If so, why?
3. Read Mark 7:1-13 on page 1. What stands out to you in this passage? Jesus accused religious leaders of nullifying the intent of God's commands with made-up traditions. Can you think of any modern-day examples of this?
4. Are there any ways you have let go of the commands of God in order to observe your own traditions? Do you identify with any of the following? If so, how?
 - Do you ever try to figure out how close you can get to sin without sinning?
 - Do you believe there is a ritual that makes you right with God while removing your responsibility to make things right with others?
 - Do you feel guiltier about missing church than mistreating someone at work (or home, school, or in your community)?
 - Are you banking on the myth that God has short-term memory loss?
5. Are there any relationships in your life where you are looking for a religious loophole or workaround so you won't have to do the most loving thing??

FINAL APPLICATION

“The kingdom of God is near, and everyone is invited to participate.” Who can you make feel welcome in the Kingdom of God this week?