

## Are Ethics Situational?

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### Introduction

The world practices a variety of ethical systems. Here are a few:

- The Calvinist says, *whatever* you do, you didn't do it, God did.
- The Atheist says, *whatever* you do, it doesn't matter; everything is permitted.
- Judas Iscariot says, *whatever* you do, don't turn your back
- The Social Anarchism says, *whatever* you do, don't get caught.
- The Pharisee says, *whatever* you do, do it to be seen of men (Matthew 6:1).
- The liberal says, *whatever* you do, do it as long as your heart is right.
- The Change Agent says, *whatever* you do, surrender the Truth.
- The fence sitting Middle of the Roader says, *whatever* you do, hug *everybody*, don't disagree.
- The Playboy says, *whatever* you do, have fun.
- The Politician says, *whatever* you do, be able to blame another.
- The husband says, *whatever* you do, wait until halftime.
- The wife says, *whatever* you do, don't do it.
- Joseph Fletcher (promulgator of Situation Ethics) says, *whatever* you do, what you do isn't important, as long as you love.
- Paul taught, *whatever* you do, "do all in the name of the Lord" and "do all to the glory of God" (Colossians 3:17; 1 Corinthians 10:31).

My assignment is to take a closer look at Situation Ethics in the light of the One Truth (which, to those who hold the Situation Ethic's view, is a waste of energy since there is no prescriptive principles with which to compare).

### Basic Understanding of Situation Ethics

Without going into the variety of meanings and usages of the word "ethics," here is our working definition: Morality, morals, what people ought to do, with what people should do. They ought to do what is right! They ought to shun what is wrong!

In 1966 Joseph Fletcher (1905-92), a professor at the Episcopal Theological School, published his *Situation Ethics: The New Morality*. In it, he advocates a so-called "Christian" ethic based on

existential situations rather than prescriptive principles. More specifically, in his book, Mr. Fletcher says, "Whether any form of sex is good or evil depends on whether love is fully served" (139). Mr. Fletcher's "any form of sex" includes hetero, homo, auto, bi or whatever. He also says, "There are times when a man has to push his principles aside and do the right thing" (13). When should we push our principles aside? Mr. Fletcher answers, "The ruling norm of Christian decision is love, nothing else" (69). He believes love is the only thing that matters, saying, "Only one thing is intrinsically good; namely, love: nothing else at all" (56). Concerning the ten commandments, Fletcher said, "...situation ethics has good reason to hold it as a duty in some situations to break them, any or all of them" (74). These thoughts give you a good view of the philosophy.

In agreeing with Mr. Fletcher, Richard Longenecker has captured Mr. Fletcher's harmful view, saying,

Christians can determine what should be done in any particular case simply by getting the facts of the situation clearly in view, and then asking themselves, "What is the loving thing to do in this case?" Such an approach, of course, does not rule out the prescriptive, for it accepts love as the one great principle for life. (2)

In defense of Mr. Fletcher's ethic standard, Dale Turner, a columnist for The Seattle Times, erroneously narrows our choices of ethics to either doing what the majority prescribes or doing what love alone dictates. He sarcastically jabs his critics, saying, "It is better, the critics say, to abide by laws, prescribed by many and surviving the test of time, than to think we are wise enough to know the most loving thing to do in any given situation" (2). Laws which have been prescribed by the many are no better than Joseph Fletcher's Situation Ethics. Mr. Turner, your options are too narrow. We have more choices than the law of the major and the law of only love. Laws and precepts prescribed by a benevolent Creator who knows His creation is the only option that makes good sense. This standard can be found in the Bible.

### **Situation Ethics Is Not Unique to Joseph Fletcher or to the 20<sup>th</sup> Century**

Within the last 2 decades, others have taught this error. Mother Teresa (1910-97, Albanian-born Indian nun and missionary) practiced the idea that the kind of work you do isn't important; whatever you do, do it with love. On his web site, Dallas Burdette teaches Situations Ethics, but he calls it "Graded Absolutism" (3). We will have more to say about Mr. Burdette in a moment. Humanism also advocates situation ethics. *The Humanist Manifesto II* decalres, "Ethics is autonomous and situational, needing no theological or ideological sanction. Ethics stems from human need and interest" (17). In October, 1984, Cecil Hook wrote a book entitled, *Free In Christ*. In the fifth chapter, he writes, "Even the most rigid of God's laws were not always inflexible. There are examples showing that in certain circumstances there was elasticity in the most absolute laws. In this lesson we shall look for the principles which take precedence over law" (1). What are Mr. Hook's imagined principles that must "take precedence over law"? In the same chapter, he answers, "If we understand a law to conflict with mercy and love, we have misinterpreted the law. The fundamental principles should prevail, for they are the purpose of the law" (1). As you can see, Mr. Fletcher is not alone in his false doctrine.

A few centuries back, a doctrine called “Casuistry” flourished. It is the application of ethical principles in terms of specific cases. In Theological ethics the practice developed in the 8th century. It became quite prevalent centuries later. Kant (Immanuel 1724-1804 German philosopher) and Pascal (Blaise 1623-1662 French mathematician & philosopher) condemned the system, and in the 17<sup>th</sup> century it fell into neglect, though it has continued until today, under the name of Situation Ethics, “Graded Absolutism” and “Values Clarification.”

Before that, the Jews in Jesus’ day practiced a form of situational ethics (Mark 7:9-13). In order to get around the clear command of God to “honor thy father and thy mother,” the self-righteous Jews were excusing themselves of this responsibility by using their imagined “it is Corban” escape clause, an escape clause they developed for their own use. They claimed that they had dedicated all of their money and possessions to God; therefore, they had nothing left with which to support their parents. Though the “it is Corban” philosophy gives all to God because of one’s love and devotion to God, it is a false philosophy based on a false concept of love. It fails to love one’s parents as God has commanded. But, of course, those who hold love as their only guiding principle can void God’s commands when the law of God gets in the way of their imagined love.

### **Situation Ethics or Graded Absolutism Is Faulty**

The following examples show the dire consequences of Situation Ethics (Graded Absolutism). In 2001, Andrea Yates murdered her five children. What was her motive? Love. She loved her children so much that she did not want to see them burn in hell. According to the proper application of Situation Ethics (Graded Absolutism), Mother Yates did no sin. Keep in mind that she had/has no idea whether or not her children would have been lost. They could have become Christians. After all, she is reported to have been a member of the Lord’s Church.

Let us suppose that we know some things that Mother Yates does not know. Let us suppose that one of the boys that she murdered had lived and had grown up to be a gospel preacher. Let us also suppose, in Boy Yate’s preaching lifetime, he converts hundreds, even thousands. Now, which is the loving thing to do? Folks, the answer is immaterial as far as ascertaining whether what she ought to have or what she ought not to have done. She ought not have murdered her children. We give this scenario to emphasize that Joseph Fletcher’s Situation Ethics is faulty. It will not work. The philosophy demands that its disciples gain an unobtainable knowledge and exercise a greater-than-Solomon wisdom. It cannot be done!

On his web site, Mr. Dallas Burdette, advocate of Situation Ethics under the new term of “Graded Absolutism,” presents his readers with two cases that illustrate the loving thing to do. He says [following is an edited version of one of the examples],

To set the stage for the principle of “mercy” over “law,” this author presents two stories about murder and wife abuse. These two stories illustrate the “person-in-the-situation”....

**CASE NUMBER ONE.** According to a police report, two men (Grady Gibson and Eddie Hart) conspired to kill the wife of Eddie to collect insurance money. This young woman was

taken out into the woods, tied to a tree, and almost decapitated by Grady Gibson. He did not have sex with her, he simply cut off her head.... He [Grady] is in for life! Now, the question: Is Mrs. Gibson bound to her husband, Grady Gibson, for the rest of her life simply because he did not have sex with the woman he murdered—he just cut her head off? Does she have scriptural grounds to divorce him and remarry, even though adultery was not committed? Some say yes, others say no.

Since Mrs. Gibson's husband is incarcerated in prison for life, without a chance for parole.... What is the status of the wife since the husband did not commit adultery, but murder? Since she divorced her husband, is she free to marry again? Is she bound to this man for the rest of his life? Are there any principles set forth in the Scriptures whereupon one can make a rational decision concerning her predicament? Can she remarry without sinning?.... (11)

Mr. Burdette advocates that the loving thing to do is to allow the wife to remarry.

Perhaps the most bizarre example of this kind of relativistic and subjective thinking occurred in connection with the infamous Charles Manson family. Susan Atkins was one of the participants in the 1969 scene of unparalleled modern carnage. Actress Sharon Tate, eight months pregnant, was cruelly savaged. When Atkins was asked by police deputies about the rationale behind the killing, she smiled and cooed, "You have to have a real love in your heart to do this for people." The deputies said that Atkins seemed grotesquely sincere. Charles Manson's philosophy is the same as Joseph Fletcher's. This can be seen in the following proclamation from Manson himself. I have seen several reports that Manson has said, "I haven't got any guilt about anything because I have never been able to see any wrong.... I have always said: Do what your love tells you, and I do what my love tells me." Thus, both Susan and Charles said the motive behind the carnage of Sharon Tate was love. Keep in mind that this philosophy was in the midst of the "Jesus Freak" movement which advocated group love.

The disciple of Situation Ethics might respond and say, "This is not love." Whether it is or it isn't is not the issue. The very fact that one can see that humans call bizarre actions love demonstrates that the philosophy of love only is the wrong standard to follow. Man must have a sure guide, a guide that can be found in the Bible.

Situation ethics ignores the sanctity of life. By so doing, it makes one an ally with the ungodly belief of Humanist. According to their own words, Humanists and Mr. Fletcher, "drop the...sanctity-of-life ethic and embrace a quality-of-life ethic." In 1974, Humanists awarded Joseph Fletcher the Humanist of the Year for his contributions in ethics, saying,

Dr. Fletcher's contribution was in the field of ethics. He came from a Protestant base but thoroughly studies all aspects of theology, philosophy, and Humanist thought. He developed a clear statement of ethical principles that set aside the old ideas of dependence on absolute religious rules. Dr. Fletcher's research continued in hospitals and medical schools where he learned firsthand the ethical dilemmas met daily by doctors as lifesaving technologies improved. Dr. Fletcher's scholarship is reflected in writings which include *Situation Ethics* (1966) and *Humanhood: Essays in Biomedical Ethics* (1979)...In *The Humanist*, July/August 1974, he wrote, "...we should drop the...sanctity-of-life ethic and embrace a quality-of-life ethic." --M.M. (1)

These are not policies of "quality-of-life" but of "imposed death." Speaking out of both sides of their mouths, Humanists, with their situation ethics and so-called "lifesaving technologies," advocate the taking of the life of a three day old baby and the 80 year old grandmother who has outlived her usefulness.

The most menacing problem of all, however, is, it makes us all creators of truth. Or, as another has said, "each of us decides what is true for me." Such arrogance effects grisly consequences. Compare the book of Judges.

### **Proper Love Recognizes the Need for Mankind To Adhere to God's Commandments in All Situations**

We must adhere to God's statutes. Life demands that we make judgments (John 7:24; Mat 7:1). Without a proper standard, man's lack of total insight hinders him from making proper decisions (Jeremiah 10:23; Proverbs 14:12). God, who knows mankind and his needs, calls upon mankind to use the divine rule book (Isaiah 34:16; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; John 8:30-34). By learning what God has said and what God meant, we can live a productive life that will benefit those around us.

Try this exercise as you read the following Bible passages that refute situation ethics. Read the verse, then immediately read Mr. Fletcher's viewpoint which says, what you do isn't important, as long as you love.

- John 14:15 If ye love me, ye will keep my commandments.
- 1 John 2:3-5 And hereby we know that we know him, if we keep his commandments. 4 He that saith, I know him, and keepeth not his commandments, is a liar, and the truth is not in him; 5 but whoso keepeth his word, in him verily hath the love of God been perfected. Hereby we know that we are in him:
- 1 John 5:2-3 By this we know that we love the children of God, when we love God, and keep his commandments. 3 For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments: and his commandments are not grievous.
- Galatians 5:6 For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision availeth anything, nor uncircumcision; but faith working through love.
- Colossians 3:17 And whatsoever ye do, in word or in deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him.

The two do not agree, do they? They are as far apart as the North Pole is from the South Pole. As far as I can see, Mr. Fletcher's viewpoint is just as cold as both. If a standard disagrees with the Bible, as does the philosophy of Mr. Fletcher and Mr. Burdette and Mr Hook, it is to be discarded. Discard it because for one's happiness.

### Conclusion

Man is not born with an innate ethical or moral goodness, nor is man born with innate unethical and immoral inclination. He learns both good and evil. If he does not learn good, he will learn evil. He may learn good and choose evil. When he chooses good, he must have the proper standard of good from which to choose.

Where will his standard arise? This lesson has presented two basic standards from which to choose. One may decide to abide by God's prescribed manner of living. Or, one may choose to follow Mr. Fletcher's ethical guidance, which means he is deciding his ethics as the situation dictates, without any standard. The results of following Mr. Fletcher's standard is deadly to its disciples and a menace to mankind. This philosophy, in the name of so-called mercy and love, allows murder, butchery and adultery. It is to be rejected—soundly rejected.

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