

Are There Bible Examples of Situation Ethics?

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Introduction

In recent years there has been an immense amount of publicity given to what Joseph Fletcher, in his popular but poisonous book *Situation Ethics*, developed into a philosophy. It is another devilish device to substitute human situations calling for a moral response for what the Scriptures State. Situation ethics is totally subjective with each person deciding in a given moment whether he is going to do what he wants to do or what Scripture, God's Word, enjoins on him. Scripture is objective, meaning that we appeal for authority for our action to a source external to us. That source is the Word of God *period*.

Religious proponents of situation ethics frequently appeal to selected actions in both testaments contending that they have a Biblical basis for their situational decisions. I shall number and note some of these with prompt refutations then submitted.

(1) The Egyptian Midwives. The Egyptian Pharaoh, fearing Israel's great growth and deeming them a potential threat to Egypt in future warfare, commanded the midwives to kill Hebrew males at birth and preserve the female babies. Shiphrah and Puah, midwives who are named, feared God and "saved the men children alive" (Exodus 1:17). The Egyptian king called them to give an account as to why they had disobeyed his strict orders. They answered, "Because the Hebrew women are not as the Egyptian women; for they are lively, and are delivered ere the midwives come into them" (Exodus 1:19). God dealt well with the midwives as per verse 20.

Various objections have been raised relative to all this. Did only two midwives serve all Israelite women en masse? The two named ones might well have been the chief ones and had others working under them. Did these two lie to Pharaoh and did God approve of such? Again, they may have been the only ones since the Hebrew women, healthier and stronger than Egyptian women, gave birth before the midwives were summoned. Neighbors and members of the household may have assisted the childbirth's. God blessed the midwives because they honored a divine decree rather than a cruel, cold and callused human edict from an insensitive dictator. There is *no* situational ethics system approved here.

(2) Rahab the Harlot and Her Lie. Joshua, the leader who succeeded Moses, sent two men to spy out Jericho prior to their taking of it. They were befriended, shielded and assisted by Rahab. What about her past and did God approve of such? Some have contended that she was merely an innkeeper and not a harlot in the usual sense of the word at all. There seems to be little doubt that in her past she had been a prostitute selling her body for immoral purposes. But this was in her past-not the present and certainly not the future. She is commended in Hebrews 11:31 and James 2:25 because of her faith, works of righteousness and deep fear of God. She came into the Hebrew family by marriage and became an ancestor of both David and Jesus as related in Matthew 1:4-6. In marvelous fashion she demonstrated the transforming power of God and His Word in her checkered life. Impurity was traded for purity and piety. Paganism was exchanged for the worship and service of the one true and living God-Jehovah.

What about the lies she told the Jericho authorities relative to the two spies in Joshua 2:3ff? Did God approve of such? God Himself cannot lie as we note in Hebrews 6:18 and Titus 1:2. Therefore, He cannot and will not approve or condone the lies of anybody. Remember that she is from a pagan past and is just beginning to learn of the one true and living God. She did what her meager knowledge of right and wrong suggested. This also is military strategy. In the battle later to take Ai, Joshua feigned a military movement to get the Ai soldier away from their home base in order that Israel might conquer the city. Do we fault him for so doing? The bible does not for God gave them the victory. Let us judge Rahab by what she became and remained and not by a past action when her knowledge of God and His law of honesty was so very deficient in her heart. There is no divine approval of situation ethics throughout this whole account. If so, where is it?

(3) David and the Showbread. We read about this initially in 1 Samuel 21:3ff. Jesus alluded to such when His enemies accused His disciples of a Sabbath day violation as they plucked ears of grain on the Sabbath day (Matthew 12:1ff, Mark 2:23ff, and Luke 6:1ff). The disciples were not violating the Sabbath by such permitted actions at all. Had they been doing so, Jesus would have been the very first one to correct such an infraction. In answer, Jesus referred to David and the showbread and what the priests did regularly on each Sabbath day. He showed their glaring inconsistency. They exonerated David, their great Hebrew hero, of any blame yet he ate that which was unlawful. Jesus called David's actions unlawful yet His enemies found no fault in what David had done. Yet they faulted the disciples who had not violated the Sabbath day by their grain plucking at all. He also told His enemies of what the priests did on the Sabbath days and yet were blameless. As the Lord of the Sabbath, Jesus knew and knew perfectly what was proper and improper by what of actions on the Sabbath day. His disciples were without fault in what they had done. There is no situational ethics system operating here as evidenced by Jesus' defense of his disciples. He did not say David did right by partaking of the show bread in a time of need. He defended His disciples and the priestly actions on the Sabbath day because neither group stood guilty of Sabbath day violations.

(4) The Imprecatory Psalms. Objections are frequently leveled against some of the sentiments in Psalms claiming they breathe forth a spirit of vengeance and a desire for punishment to be inflicted upon enemies of Israel. Here are a few of them-3: 7, 5:9,10, 18:34ff, 35:1ff, 58:4ff, 137:9, 139:19ff, 140:8ff, 141:1ff, and 149:7ff. There are others but these will serve our purpose in noting a few of them. Do these offer situations that determine right and wrong actions? What observations can be offered by way of answer? The following are taken from my book, *Studies In Psalms*, which I wrote during the 1980's.

It will not do to deny, as some have done, the inspiration of these Psalms. David wrote some of these sentiments and he affirmed, "the Spirit of the lord spoke by me, and his word was in my tongue" (2 Samuel 23:2). Peter affirmed in Acts 1:16 that David spoke by the Holy Spirit. He would be one of the holy men who spoke as moved by the Holy Spirit (2 Peter 1:21).

All of the so-called imprecations were against enemies of righteousness. Not that first one was directed against the pure and pious.

Some of these simply registered how different ones would feel when they engaged in these

atrocities such as with the Babylonians in their coming destruction as set out in Psalm 137:8,9.

A head of state-David made some of these imprecations for instance-who was legally obligated to mete out punishment to criminals who warred against the Israelite state. Civil government has always had the divine approval and obligation to punish evil men. Paul and Peter both deal with this in Romans 13:1ff and 1Peter 2:13,14.

The very fact that God frequently used his people as an instrument to punish wicked people would have encouraged the sure development of such sentiments. Look at the conquering of the pagan nations by Joshua and the military exploits by both judges and kings later in the Old Testament.

It is right-never wrong-that evil be punished. This is an undergirding principle of our whole system of law. The way of the transgressor is hard (Proverbs 13:15). A part of that present punishment is meted out by duly authorized civil powers.

Some of these no doubt reflected the true feelings of men less than perfect and the bible is not to be defaulted and its inspiration impeached any more for these than for other imperfections associated with the finite scribes of Holy Writ and the erring people they portrayed.

All these Psalmists lived under a law greatly inferior to Christianity. It is wrong, grossly so, to judge them by Christianity when they never lived a day under the sunlit truths of Jesus and Christianity.

These will not solve all questions about these difficult-to-understand verses but perhaps will aid to some degree as touching why they are recorded.

These offer no syllable of support for situations to be authoritative norms in what we think, say and do. Only the Word of God can do that.

(5) The Woman Taken in Adultery. The apostle John is the lone penman to include this. He recorded it in John 8:1-11. The Lord had spent the previous night on the Mount of Olives. He may have lodge with Martha, Mary and Lazarus since Bethany, their home, is situated on the eastern slopes of Olivet. Early in the morning He returned to the temple area and taught. His enemies brought (dragged is in the Greek construction here) an adulterous woman before Him charging her with that very act. They claim to have caught her in the very act of adultery. They reminded Him of what Moses taught about stoning such in Deuteronomy 22:22. They asked for a verdict from Him. They were not interested in justice or even honoring Moses. Had they been, the man who was also involved would have been brought with her. If caught in the very act, the man was present when they apprehended her. Rome had removed capital punishment powers from Jewish circles. Had he said stone her, they would have hailed Him to the Roman authorities as someone opposing Caesar's law. Had he said to spare her they would have told the people that He was undermining Mosaic authority in such matters. They did not mind which horn of the dilemma he took. They either forgot or ignored Deuteronomy 17:7 about the witnesses to prosecute such an actions. Hence, he charged the ones without sin to cast the first stone. From the oldest to the youngest all her accusers made a hasty and embarrassing exit. With all of them gone, the Lord told her, "Neither do I condemn thee: go, and sin no more" (John 8:11).

He did not condone her sin but sought to lead her to a higher plateau of purity.

There are no situation ethics principles at work here-not that first one.

CONCLUSION

Situation ethics are never found with God's approval in either testament. Eve and the serpent appealed to it in Eden. In modern times we have to go to the writings of such men as Joseph Fletcher, Emil Brunner, Reinhold Niebuhr and John A T. Robinson to educate us relative to this poisonous system of situation ethics.

Scripture, not situations, determines human thoughts, words and actions.