

# Situation Ethics

The Way that Seems Right to a Man

## Hebrews 5:13–14 (ESV)

**13** for everyone who lives on milk is unskilled in the word of righteousness, since he is a child. **14** But solid food is for the mature, for those who have their powers of discernment trained by constant practice to distinguish good from evil.





# What is Situation Ethics?

**Situation ethics** takes into account the particular context of an act when evaluating it ethically, rather than judging it according to absolute moral standards. In situation ethics, within each context it is not a universal law that is to be followed, but the law of love.

# What Does Situation Ethics Mean by the Law of Love?

An action someone makes should be judged according to the love ... in it, so the [person] must always ask: what is the most loving thing to do?

# What Does Situation Ethics Mean by Love?

- The Greek word used to describe love in the Bible is "agape".
- Agape is the type of love that shows concern about others, caring for them as much as you care for yourself.
- Agape love has no strings attached to it, it seeks nothing in return. you love someone completely unconditionally.

# Who Popularized Situation Ethics in our Country?

- Joseph Fletcher (b. 1905 in New Jersey; d. 1991 in Charlottesville, VA)
- Ordained Episcopal priest
- Taught Christian Ethics at Episcopal Divinity School and at Harvard Divinity School from 1944 to 1970
- Wrote *Situation Ethics: The New Morality* in 1966



# What Situations Might Require Us to Put Love Ahead of Law?

- Avoiding medical treatment to secure a life insurance payment for one's family
- The decision to use atomic bombs in WWII
- A spy using seduction and blackmail to end a war
- A German POW committing adultery to get pregnant so she would be released to her family

# Does Situation Ethics Teach that the End Justifies the Means?

- That is one of the “fundamental principles” of Situation Ethics:
  - “Only the end justifies the means, nothing else. Actions only acquire moral status as a means to an end.” Fletcher (1963, pg. 120)
  - For Fletcher, the end must be the most loving result. When measuring a situation, one must consider the desired end, the means available, the motive for acting and the foreseeable consequences. - thus, you must recognize that anything may be done if it brings about the most loving outcome.

# Does the Bible teach Situation Ethics?

**Matthew 22:35–40 (ESV) — 35** And one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. **36** “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?” **37** And he said to him, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. **38** This is the great and first commandment. **39** And a second is like it: You shall love your neighbor as yourself. **40** On these two commandments depend all the Law and the Prophets.”

# Does the Bible teach Situation Ethics?

**Romans 13:8–10 (ESV)** — **8** Owe no one anything, except to love each other, for the one who loves another has fulfilled the law. **9** For the commandments, “You shall not commit adultery, You shall not murder, You shall not steal, You shall not covet,” and any other commandment, are summed up in this word: “You shall love your neighbor as yourself.” **10** Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.

# Shouldn't the "Greatest Commandments" Override/Overrule other Commandments?

- The greatest commands are the ones on which the rest of the law is based.
- But the other laws are expressions of the great commands, and are binding because of that.
- Love and commandment keeping are never in conflict; one is an expression of the other!

## John 14:21–24 (ESV)

**21** Whoever has my commandments and keeps them, he it is who loves me. And he who loves me will be loved by my Father, and I will love him and manifest myself to him” ... **23** ....., “If anyone loves me, he will keep my word, and my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him. **24** Whoever does not love me does not keep my words. And the word that you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent me.

# **1 John 5:3 (ESV)**

**3** For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.



Didn't some in the Bible have to  
“break the law” to do what was right?

- The Egyptian midwives

## Exodus 1:16–21 (ESV)

**16** “When you serve as midwife to the Hebrew women and see them on the birthstool, if it is a son, you shall kill him, but if it is a daughter, she shall live.” **17** But the midwives feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live. **18** So the king of Egypt called the midwives and said to them, “Why have you done this, and let the male children live?” **19** The midwives said to Pharaoh, “Because the Hebrew women are not like the Egyptian women, for they are vigorous and give birth before the midwife comes to them.” **20** So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong. **21** And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.

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- The Egyptian midwives
- David and Ahimelech

# 1 Samuel 21:3–6 (ESV)

**3** Now then, what do you have on hand? Give me five loaves of bread, or whatever is here.” **4** And the priest answered David, “I have no common bread on hand, but there is holy bread—if the young men have kept themselves from women.” **5** And David answered the priest, “Truly women have been kept from us as always when I go on an expedition....” **6** So the priest gave him the holy bread, for there was no bread there but the bread of the Presence, which is removed from before the LORD, to be replaced by hot bread on the day it is taken away.

## Matthew 12:1–8 (ESV)

**1** At that time Jesus went through the grainfields on the Sabbath. His disciples were hungry, and they began to pluck heads of grain and to eat. **2** But when the Pharisees saw it, they said to him, “Look, your disciples are doing what is not lawful to do on the Sabbath.” **3** He said to them, “Have you not read what David did when he was hungry, and those who were with him: **4** how he entered the house of God and ate the bread of the Presence, which it was not lawful for him to eat nor for those who were with him, but only for the priests?”

## Matthew 12:1–8 (ESV)

“**5** Or have you not read in the Law how on the Sabbath the priests in the temple profane the Sabbath and are guiltless? **6** I tell you, something greater than the temple is here. **7** And if you had known what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice,’ you would not have condemned the guiltless. **8** For the Son of Man is lord of the Sabbath.”

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- The Egyptian midwives
- David and Ahimelech
- Rahab, the harlot

## Joshua 2:1–6 (ESV)

**1** And Joshua the son of Nun sent two men secretly from Shittim as spies, saying, “Go, view the land, especially Jericho.” And they went and came into the house of a prostitute whose name was Rahab and lodged there. **2** And it was told to the king of Jericho, “Behold, men of Israel have come here tonight to search out the land.”

## Joshua 2:1–6 (ESV)

**3** Then the king of Jericho sent to Rahab, saying, “Bring out the men who have come to you, who entered your house, for they have come to search out all the land.” **4** But the woman had taken the two men and hidden them. And she said, “True, the men came to me, but I did not know where they were from. **5** And when the gate was about to be closed at dark, the men went out. I do not know where the men went. Pursue them quickly, for you will overtake them.” **6** But she had brought them up to the roof and hid them with the stalks of flax that she had laid in order on the roof.

## Hebrews 11:31 (NKJV)

**31** By faith the harlot Rahab did not perish with those who did not believe, when she had received the spies with peace.

# Who in the Bible might be surprised at the teachings of Situation Ethics?

- Uzzah

## 2 Samuel 6:6–7 (ESV)

**6** And when they came to the threshing floor of Nacon, Uzzah put out his hand to the ark of God and took hold of it, for the oxen stumbled. **7** And the anger of the LORD was kindled against Uzzah, and God struck him down there because of his error, and he died there beside the ark of God.

# Who in the Bible might be surprised at the teachings of Situation Ethics?

- Uzzah
- The Romans

## Romans 3:7–8 (ESV)

**7** But if through my lie God's truth abounds to his glory, why am I still being condemned as a sinner? **8** And why not do evil that good may come?—as some people slanderously charge us with saying. Their condemnation is just.

# Who in the Bible might be surprised at the teachings of Situation Ethics?

- Uzzah
- The Romans
- Heroes of faith who “did not accept deliverance”

## Hebrews 11:35–38 (ESV)

**35** Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life. **36** Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. **37** They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated— **38** of whom the world was not worthy—wandering about in deserts and mountains, and in dens and caves of the earth.

# What is the danger of Situation Ethics?

“The situationist enters into every decision-making situation fully armed with the ethical maxims of his community and its heritage, and he treats them with respect as illuminators of his problems. Just the same he is prepared in any situation to compromise them or set them aside *in the situation* if love seems better served by doing so.” – Joseph Fletcher, Situation Ethics, p. 26

# What is the danger of Situation Ethics?

“... he is prepared in any situation to compromise them or set them aside *in the situation* if love seems better served by doing so”

Man's reason is placed over God's law.

**Proverbs 14:12** There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.

**Jeremiah 10:23** I know, O LORD, that the way of man is not in himself, that it is not in man who walks to direct his steps.

# Whatever Became of Joseph Fletcher?

- He was the first professor of medical ethics at the University of Virginia
- He promoted euthanasia, abortion and eugenics



# Fletcher Quotes

- "We need to educate people to the idea that the quality of life is more important than mere length of life. Our cultural tradition holds that life has absolute value, but that is really not good enough anymore. Sometimes, no life is better."
- "People [with children with Down's syndrome]... have no reason to feel guilty about putting a Down's syndrome baby away, whether it's "put away" in the sense of hidden in a sanitarium or in a more responsible lethal sense. It is sad; yes. Dreadful. But it carries no guilt. True guilt arises only from an offense against a person, and a Down's is not a person."

# The Danger of Situation Ethics

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- He signed the Humanist Manifesto and was the Humanist of the Year in 1974.



# The Humanist Manifesto

“[W]e affirm that moral values derive their source from human experience. Ethics is autonomous and situational, needing no theological or ideological sanction.”

# Whatever Became of Joseph Fletcher?

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- He promoted euthanasia, abortion and eugenics
- He signed the Humanist Manifesto and was the Humanist of the Year in 1974.
- He died an atheist



What is the danger of Situation Ethics?

**Proverbs 14:12** - There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.



## Hebrews 4:12–13

For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart. **13** And no creature is hidden from his sight, but all are naked and exposed to the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

