

While love for our fellow man is indeed a crucial and mandatory aspect of Christianity, the *central* focus of Christians is one of honoring, glorifying, obeying and loving *God*. That is the *first* commandment. And John 14:15 states —

“If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.” (NASB)

Love for our fellow man must be placed in its rightful position — i.e. held *beneath* the greater and higher responsibility of love and obedience to *God*.

We might view our love of God in a circular sort of way since I John 4:20 states —

“If someone says, ‘I love God,’ and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen.” (NASB)

If we subscribe to the fact that situation ethics is acceptable, it would be possible for one to love his fellow man and *not* love God. If one however loves *God* and therefore keeps His commandments, that individual would not fail to love his fellow man. So situation ethics — in practice — fails to place ones love for others in the *larger* framework of obedience first and foremost to God.

The Scriptures contain a strict moral code that Christians are to follow. Man does *not* have the authority to determine when that code must be followed and when it should *not* be followed. In an article titled *A Critical Look at Situation Ethics*, Wayne Jackson of ChristianCourier.com states:

“Situation ethics removes God from the throne as the moral sovereign of the universe, and substitutes man in his place. Situationism completely ignores the biblical view that mere mortals are void of sufficient wisdom to guide their earthly activity (cf. Jeremiah 10:23).”

God has not given permission to *any* man to transgress His Law for *any* reason — no matter *what* — or how justifiable — the motive might seem to be to *us*. We don’t have the wisdom to *always* differentiate between good and bad motives.

“...The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart.” (1 Samuel 16:7 NIV)

“The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it? I the Lord search the heart,...” (Jeremiah 17:9-10 KJV)

If Daniel had used situation ethics, would he have knelt at his window and prayed? Surely God wouldn’t want to *lose* such a *good* servant! Would Shadrach, Meshach or Abednego have bowed down? Perhaps they could have reasoned that they *needed* to stay *alive* for the sake of wives or children. Perhaps God would have shown *mercy* on them had they done so — like he showed mercy on David, Rahab and others for *their* sins. But that has little to do with whether the *actions* were right or wrong and whether or not God would have *approved*. To break a commandment of God for an earthly motive is to focus upon things of this world and to ignore eternity.

“Diligence” is a privately funded publication of:  
Dennis and Sherri Owens — Cincinnati, Ohio  
diligence@gorfsystems.com — <http://diligence.gorfsystems.com/>



# DILIGENCE

“We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure.” — Hebrews 6:11

A ministry of Dennis and Sherri Owens

Volume 9

January 15, 2011

Issue 22

## Motives

The Dictionary defines motive as “the reason for a certain course of action, whether conscious or unconscious.” So if a particular “course of action” is the right thing to do — can the *motive* make it wrong? How about vice-versa? If a particular action is wrong — can the motive make it right?

We’ll get back to that in a minute. But first, we should point out that it is impossible for anyone to judge the motive of another — we can’t even *always* be certain of our *own* motives. Remember the definition of motive stated “...whether conscious or unconscious.” Only God can see into the heart of each of us and know the *true* motive behind actions we — or someone else — may take or fail to take.

Back now to that first paragraph — *can* the motive change whether an action is right or wrong? Well — as just stated, it’s impossible for us to judge the motives behind the actions of others, but there are several Scriptural examples that might provide at least a *bit* of insight into this discussion. Let’s start with a look at a couple involving Peter.

“From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life. Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ‘Never, Lord!’ he said. ‘This shall never happen to you!’ Jesus turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to me; you do not have in mind the concerns of God, but merely human concerns.’” (Matthew 16:21-23 NIV)

“Then Simon Peter, who had a sword, drew it and struck the high priest’s servant, cutting off his right ear. ... Jesus commanded Peter, ‘Put your sword away! Shall I not drink the cup the Father has given me?’” (John 18:10-11 NIV)

What do you think was Peter’s motive in both of these instances? Don’t you think it had to be his *love* for Christ? Wouldn’t *love* be as pure a motive as you could get — even though cutting off someone’s ear would *never* be defined as a *good* action to take? Christ even called him *Satan*! So we can see that an act — even though it was motivated by *love* — can turn into something as evil as Satan? So Christ determined that an action resulting from a motive of pure love was really pure evil! The second instance was similar in motive. Peter was trying to protect Jesus because he loved Him — certainly not a *bad* motive — but again,

the action that resulted from that pure motive was *not* acceptable. So in both of these examples, we have a pure motive resulting in unacceptable actions.

Let's go now to the Old Testament for another example involving motives that resulted in certain actions. Joshua, chapter 2 tells the story of a prostitute named Rahab. When the king of Jericho sent a message to Rahab asking her to turn the Israelite spies over to him — even though she had hid the spies on her roof — she *lied* and told the messenger they had left the city — and if they hurried, they just *might* be able to catch them. Well now, we *know* that lying is not an acceptable action in God's sight and it appears — as we read the entire account — that her motive was one of two possibilities. Her lie *could* have been motivated by self preservation for herself and her family since she had heard of the protection God had provided for the Israelites. The other possibility is that even though she was a harlot in a completely pagan society, she had developed a faith in God because of the stories she had heard about Him. Whatever her motive was, that lie she told allowed the spies to return to Joshua with a report that Jericho could be taken. So what do you think about the motive — whatever it was — that prompted her to lie, in relation to the result that occurred *because* of it? Did her *motive* make it *right* to tell a lie? *Was* her motive a selfish one or an honorable one? There's no way to know for certain. About all we *can* determine is that her action *was* prompted by her motive — whatever it was.

Now a parable from the Scriptures that provides a slightly different slant on a specific motive prompting a specific action —

*“At that time the kingdom of heaven will be like ten virgins who took their lamps and went out to meet the bridegroom. Five of them were foolish and five were wise. The foolish ones took their lamps but did not take any oil with them. The wise ones, however, took oil in jars along with their lamps.” (Matthew 25:1-4 NIV)*

The *rest* of the story goes through verse 13. But most of us are familiar with it and know that the *motive* of the five *wise* virgins for taking *extra* oil with them was *not* for the purpose of *sharing* it with the five who would not have enough oil. Their motive instead, was to be certain that each of *them* would have enough oil for *themselves*. Now again, we *know* that sharing with those who are in need of something *we have* is absolutely a Biblical principle — yet the five who refused to share with the five in need are called the *wise* virgins. Another story that *can* be a bit confusing if we allow it to be so.

No doubt, each of you can think of other similar stories in the Scriptures that might fall into this same category. So what are we to make of all of these situations? Peter had good motives but his actions were wrong. Rahab's action had a good result even if her motive *might* have been questionable. That sounds a lot like what our current culture defines as “situation ethics” — doesn't it?

That phrase “situation ethics” came onto the scene in the mid 1960's when Joseph Fletcher published the book *Situation Ethics*. While he is often referred to as  
page 2 continued on page 3

“the father of situation ethics” he was by no means the first to advance that idea. The idea goes all the way back to Satan in the Garden of Eden when he presented Eve with the choice of being obedient to God (how boring he made *that* sound!!) or taking advantage of an opportunity to become *like* God. (How's that for an appealing motive?!). Joseph Fletcher was an Episcopal priest, a member of the Euthanasia Educational Counsel, and an advocate for Planned Parenthood. He was a supporter of both euthanasia and abortion. His premise was that all decisions should be based upon the circumstances of each particular situation — not upon *fixed* law or principles. He believed that the only absolute was love — that love should be the motive behind *every* decision. He professed that as long as love is one's intention, the end would justify the means — that justice is not in the letter of the law but is rather in *distributing* love.

So before we go on with this discussion, let's be sure we're all on the same page in regards to exactly what “situation ethics” is.

- *Dictionary.com* — a view of ethics that *deprecates general moral principles* while emphasizing the source of moral judgments in the distinctive characters of specific situations. [emphasis added]
- *Merriam Webster* — a system of ethics by which acts are judged within their contexts *instead of by categorical principles*. [emphasis added]
- *Answers.com* — A system of ethics that evaluates acts in light of their situational context *rather than by the application of moral absolutes*. [emphasis added]

So in other words we could say that situation ethics basically means that there is no ethical standard that can be consistently applied — each situation demands its own standard of ethics. That would mean that under Joseph Fletcher's theory, a person may commit adultery (or almost anything else) if it is done in love, and no one is hurt by it. A person may lie, if he *thinks* it is appropriate to spare the feelings of someone, or to be socially acceptable. A person may steal, if he does it to help a needy person, such as a starving child. In fact, there is no action that one cannot perform if in *his judgment*, that action is for a good *cause*, and if he has the proper motive for performing it.

Again, remember that Fletcher claimed that as long as the motive is *love* — any action would be justified. The two examples we've already discussed that involved Peter instantly nullify *that whole* idea. Peter's motive *had* to be one of love — yet Jesus called him *Satan* because of his actions. That example *alone* would indicate that Jesus *Himself* strongly disagreed with the theory that would eventually be called situation ethics. But let's go beyond that example.

We read in Matthew 22:37-39 —

*“Jesus replied: ‘Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.’ This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’” (NIV)*

And II Corinthians 5:9 states —

*“So we make it our goal to please him,...” (NIV)*  
page 3

*continued on page 4*