

This is not a term we use everyday. But it is an idea that many people live with and live by every day.

"A system of ethics by which acts are judged within their context instead of by categorical principle." MWD

From our study of the Bible, we are trained to see things as black and white, right and wrong, moral and immoral: sin or righteousness. So, in any situation, there is a right thing to do and a wrong thing to do.

Situational Ethics suggests it may be a bit more complicated than that. It still demands that you are ethical and seek to do right, but that each situation has to be measured by itself, not seen under a blanket, one size fits all, standard. Sometimes you may have to choose a smaller wrong for the greater good.

"It basically states that sometimes other moral principles can be cast aside in certain situations if love is best served; Love is the ultimate law." WIKI, with quote from Paul Tillich

Mostly, situational ethics are supported "in the name of Love" or doing well by another.

Example: Your wife dyes her hair purple. She comes in, insecure and shaken up and asks, "Does this look okay?" We all know that lying is wrong. But, in this situation, mercy and love for her wins out, so you can lie.

Example: You lost your job and your utilities and food may be cut off. Your neighbor has plenty. They have left town and parked a motorcycle on their back porch. To steal and sell it would be wrong, but you need to feed your family.

Example: Euthanasia – Killing the innocent is wrong. But letting them live in agony is merciless. In a situation where someone is suffering, wouldn't breaking the law and ending their life be better, in the name of love and mercy?

Example: I had a debate with a preacher not too many years ago, who taught that remarrying after divorcing was a sin. However, to remain unmarried is cruel and impossible for some. So he taught that in such a case one could remarry.

You heard me right: I said, "preacher." If a man is teaching others, it is okay to violate one command (in a given situation) for the sake of living the happy life God intended, certainly he would have Scripture to back it up! He did.

Matthew 12:1-8 – Jesus is dealing with an obstinate group of Jewish leaders who reject Him at every turn. The whole conversation, leading up to the Ninevites crying against them in the judgment, started with an accusation against Jesus' disciples found in this text.

The argument goes like this:

V1-2 – *Jesus' disciples sinned. They gathered on the 7th day, which was a violation of the Law of Moses.*

V3-4 – *Jesus makes the argument: David sinned too, and you aren't accusing him. God was okay with that.*

V5 – *In fact, priests broke the Sabbath and are completely innocent.*

V6 – *How much more so can the Christ and His disciples do the same and still be found innocent.*

V7-8 – *Mercy is more important than Sacrifice; that is, keeping all the laws. God reads hearts!*

So, they broke the law in the name of mercy; to feed their hungry bodies. God would want them to do that. In this situation, the ethical choice was to violate the Sabbath, and God deemed them innocent.

Therefore, at times we will have to make a similar call. And as long as no one is hurt against their will, and the greater love of mankind wins out, disregarding one law for the sake of the other is possible and one still be "innocent."

Well, I don't know about you, but I've got alarm bells going off here. Could this best teaching "Situational Ethics."

*My first thought is **Romans 6:1-2**. Would there ever be a situation where sin is acceptable for any reason at all?*

*And if so, this would be the only time recorded in the Bible. But there are lots of stories like this: **1 Samuel 15:3,22-23***

Let's take a closer look at Matthew 12.

I. The Disciples Did Not Sin

- a. In order for this to be a "situational ethics" case, the disciples must have had to choose a wrong in the name of something right. But they did not sin, so this case does not even qualify.
- b. First of all, it was the dishonest Pharisee who accused them of sin. Jesus said they are "innocent" (**12:7**).

- c. **V1-2** – Only laborious work was restricted on the Sabbath. (**Exodus 20:9-10; Deuteronomy 23:24-25**)
- d. **V3-4** - Jesus draws their minds back to the actions of King David (**I Samuel 21:6**). It is debatable whether David sinned or not, but if he did, all Jesus is saying is: “David actually did sin and you don’t accuse him. My disciples and I are innocent and you accuse us. Shame on you!”
- e. **V5-6** - Jesus uses sarcastic language to show their folly. Certainly no one would accuse the priests of sin for eating on the Sabbath day. “And yet I, one greater than they and the temple, you accuse?”
- f. So while the Jews accuse Jesus’ disciples of sinning and being justified for some reason; the truth is, they never sinned and would never justify poor behavior for any reason at all!

II. The Jews Missed Jesus’ Point

- a. After using David and Priests to show the foolishness of the Pharisees accusation, Jesus has a powerful point to make. This is a point the Jews missed. And in fact, my preacher friend missed it as well.
- b. **V7-8** – This is NOT some justification for situational ethics. This is a lesson for the Pharisees.
- c. **Hosea 6:1-6** – Hosea’s point is: God wants you to honor Him, not just pomp and circumstance through your offerings. Jesus wasn’t defending His men, but accusing the Pharisees! “You guys act like you have it all figured out and offer your prayers and regular sacrifices. Do you know what God wants? He wants your loyalty and for you to know Him and obey him! He wants you to show mercy and godliness toward others, not claiming a righteousness that is fake.” This is not justifying wrongdoing by the disciples, but exposing wrongdoing by the Pharisees!
- d. The Jews were hypocrites. They claimed to love God but weren’t willing to obey Him, as exemplified by the fact that they were rejecting the LORD OF THE SABBATH at that very moment!
- e. **Matthew 15:1-6** – As for our study on Situational Ethics, it was the Pharisees who tried to do it! Jesus never did and simply teaches to Honor God in every situation above everything else.

III. The Christian Must Maintain Integrity

- a. While some are looking for loopholes to do the wrong thing; and some create a conflict between two wrongs, where we are allowed to choose one; God says, “**I desire mercy (loyalty) and not sacrifice.**” For us this means we are to live the will of Christ in every choice, every interaction with other people, every day, without needing to sin to accomplish it. *Remember this: God handles outcomes. Our job is to keep integrity in the process, which is our everyday set of choices and ethical integrity.*
- b. Anyone can try to reason on behalf of bad behavior in the name of some good cause or claiming their holiness is so great that surely God will count them innocent. We must live above this mistake.
- c. At times this will be tough. At times it will look like a dilemma that requires wrong for right’s sake:
 - i. Example: A Christian woman has a husband who is not a Christian and does not want her to leave him for Sunday evening nor mid-week worship. It looks like choices: disobey God to obey husband; or disobey husband to obey God. Can she say: “*Well, in this case, I have to choose to pass on one good for the sake of another, so I will stay home with my husband.*”
 - ii. **Matthew 22:36-38** - Her situation is not one of conflicting ethics, but ordering priorities!
 - iii. **Ephesians 5:22-24 / I Corinthians 11:3** – Christ is the great Head over all and above everyone.
- d. We mustn’t look for excuses to take the easy road. We must examine each situation more closely, study and pray with an open heart, until we find the one right path that pleases God fully.
- e. This truth of studying, praying, considering, and ordering priorities applies to our opening examples:
 - i. **Wife with Purple Hair** – Speak the truth in love. 😊
 - ii. **Stealing from a Neighbor** – Seek help. Use what is legally available. Don’t multiply problems.
 - iii. **Euthanizing** – We medicate and care for people. But even if they wish: we cannot kill.
 - iv. **Divorce and Remarriage** – **Matthew 19:9-12** – Christ’s Law stands and certainly cannot be set aside for some “greater law of love or mercy.” Better not to marry than disregard His words.

Conclusion: Lest we ever attempt to do any wrong in the name of any good; lest we ever show less than kindness to others in the name of some noble cause; lest we ever stand on one side of an issue, while Jesus stands on the other: hear the words of Jesus from our opening text: “I desire mercy and not sacrifice.” That is, the proof is in the attitude and loyalty of daily choices, not the pomp and circumstance of simply claiming to be a Christian. Is there anyone here ready to put the substance of a good choice behind the claim of a good faith? For you, regardless of the “situation,” there may be but one “ethical” choice. Come to Jesus tonight.