

# Chapter 15

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## **Situational Ethics and the Law of Love**

Situational ethics has long been maligned by religious conservatives, for obvious reasons. It is troubling that in our modern society we are experiencing a breakdown in traditional morality, with the devastating consequence of the breakdown of the family. During the turbulent social upheaval that occurred in the 1960's, one of the catch phrases was "if it feels good, do it." During the period of the Judges in Israel, the nation ignored the commands of God and the people "*did what was right in their own eyes.*" When we lose our connection with God, there is a strong tendency to lose our moral compass and engage in all sorts of sinful and destructive behavior.

In Jesus' day, the religious authorities went too far in the opposite direction and established a very complex and detailed moral code of behavior. Often, the letter of the law violated the spirit and intent of the original precepts on which it was based. There were so many do's and don'ts that the people lost touch with the reasons why those laws were created in the first place. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus addressed this problem by redefining several of those commands in such a way as to conform to their spirit and intent. Jesus crossed many social, religious and ethical boundaries, in both word and deed, when He reinterpreted the commands of Scripture to conform to the one law that supersedes and overrides them all, the law of love. Every law that God has given to us is based on His love for us, and He wants us to be like Him. Jesus summed up the Law with the two commands, that we love God with all our heart and our neighbor as ourselves. According to 1 John 4:7 "*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.*" Christ has set us free from the demands of the Law, according to the Apostle Paul. Because our standing with God is based on grace, not works, Paul said, "*I have the right to do anything. . .but not everything is constructive.*"

The law of love does not give us license to do as we please or make up our own rules, regardless their negative impact on others. It does however, give us the option of departing from some of the commands of Scripture that were culturally based and no longer apply today. Here are examples I chose for purposes of illustration.

### **The Case for Abstinence from Alcohol**

In 1 Corinthians 10:23-33, the Apostle Paul makes a compelling case for abstinence. In verse 23, he points out that though many activities may be permissible, not all are necessary or constructive. Paul made the personal choice to avoid eating meat sacrificed to idols, even though there was nothing inherently wrong with this practice. But for the sake of the "*weaker brethren,*" who believed this practice to be wrong, Paul abstained from eating this meat. Paul did not want by his example to influence others to

engage in a practice which they thought sinful, thereby wounding their consciences and “*causing them to stumble.*”

Although there is not a direct correlation between drinking alcoholic beverages and eating meat sacrificed to idols, Paul teaches us a principle here which does apply. It is perfectly OK for me to drink alcohol in moderation, so long as I can control my behavior and not drink to excess. But I need to understand that by doing so I may cause a Christian brother to stumble, if because of my example he begins to drink in moderation and eventually becomes an alcoholic. It might be that he is genetically or psychologically predisposed to alcoholism, or he may not have the same ability as I to cope with the stresses of life that can in some cases lead to alcoholism. This principle especially applies to us as parents. Our children are very strongly influenced by our behavior. If we drink alcohol our children are likely to do so as well. The same holds true for other potentially addictive behaviors, such as smoking, gambling, and drugs, none of which are expressly forbidden in the scriptures. Total abstinence, therefore, represents the first line of defense in overcoming harmful addictions in the individual lives of Christians and in the lives of those for whom they become centers of influence, such as family members, friends and acquaintances, and church brethren.

## **Divorce, Slavery and Homosexuality**

The ancient Hebrew society was highly patriarchal in nature. Women were regarded mostly as possessions and not as equal partners with men. They were treated like property, with ownership transferring from the Father to the husband. They could even be sold as slaves. Men could have as many wives and concubines as they wanted. Men could divorce their wives, but wives could not divorce their husbands. Women were punished for adultery, but not men. Women were not allowed to participate in many important religious ceremonies. In some places in the Old Testament, women were treated similarly to the way they are treated by ISIS and the Taliban. They were not allowed to leave the homes of their fathers or husbands. They were restricted to economic roles with little or no authority. They could not testify in court. They were not permitted to talk to strangers. They were required to wear head coverings and veils in public. The list goes on and on. Jesus did not directly address most of those issues, but he did address the issue of divorce. He emphasized the sanctity of marriage and limited the justification for divorce to adultery. At the same time, he also taught that women should not be permitted to remarry, regardless of the reason for the divorce.

I have often wondered why Jesus didn't go further and condemn all restrictions against women. The Apostle Paul also accommodated the customs of his day regarding women's rights. He believed that women should remain subservient to their husbands, remain silent in church, cover their heads, and not wear braids. Over time, cultural mores change, but ever so gradually. Paul never spoke out against slavery, even though one of his friends and church members was a slave owner. Both Jesus and the Apostle Paul, I believe, were products of their culture, but even in areas where they might have disagreed with the popular culture, they were careful to pick the right battles. I believe the same was true with regard to other cultural issues such as slavery, homosexuality, eating meat that had been sacrificed to idols, and so on.

Most important to Jesus and the Apostle Paul were the internals, not the externals. They gave us guidelines to follow when deciding which aspects of the Hebrew laws to obey. They were mostly concerned with the spirit and intent of the law, rather than the letter. Jesus said that all the law can be summed up in only two commands, that we love God and love our neighbors as ourselves. The Apostle Paul said this: “*All things are lawful for me, but all things are not expedient. All things are lawful for me, but all things do not edify.*”

For me, this does not give us license for immorality, but it does give us license to depart from some of the cultural norms of the ancient Hebrews, in cases where there is no violation of the rule of love and where our actions will not be a stumbling block to the weaker brethren. Society has evolved tremendously for the better over the past two thousand years, at least in most parts of the world. During the past couple hundred years or so in this country, we have made tremendous strides with the issues of women's equality, slavery, and human rights. Sadly, this has been accompanied by a relaxing and erosion of morals and certain beneficial codes of conduct. I believe that as Christians, we do need to be sticking out like sore thumbs and adhere to a much higher standard of morality than what we find in the general culture. At the same time, however, I do believe that we need to make a distinction between the letter of the law vs. the spirit and intent of the law and not be afraid to depart from cultural practices which violate the law of love that Jesus taught.

I won't be trying to tell you what position you should be taking on the issues of marriage and divorce, premarital sex, abortion rights, homosexuality, and the like. I would just encourage you to examine those issues in light of the principles given above and try to be as gracious as possible with those who disagree with you.