

From Situation Ethics by Dave Miller, Ph.D.

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My thoughts are that situationists and their philosophy of situation ethics are parasitic on Christianity. It is about distorting the view of Christians about the moral demands of religion. It is a secular morality pretending to be a religious one. Situation ethics argues that rules and commandments even from God may be broken in the name of love. It tells us when stealing is in fact the most loving thing to do. It is seen as love and not as an evil of any kind then. This is actually worse than what many atheists could come up with. Why is it that religion has to be tacked on to situation ethics to invade society and ruin it? Why does it need religion to do harm? Is the answer that religion itself has a bad side that may be hard to put your finger on but you will see it sometime!

This is what Christian Dave Miller has to say on the subject of situationism.

Situationism is simply ethical relativism, in that it moves “away from code ethics, from stern and ironbound do’s and don’ts, from prescribed conduct and legalistic morality” (p. 24). Situationism bears close affinity with existentialism (pp. 26, 77, 234). “Imitative practice,” uniformity and conformity, and “metaphysical morals” are all disdained (pp. 26, 106, 240). Objective principles and abstract rules are repudiated, in exchange for “freedom and openness” (pp. 72, 76, 233, 235). Concrete absolutes are viewed unfavorably as “authoritarianism” and “rules-bound thinking” (p. 240).

SITUATIONIST PROOF TEXTS: THE ADULTEROUS WOMAN

Another way to grasp the substance of a false philosophy is to assess the way in which the Scriptures are given treatment to support the philosophy. The remainder of this article will confine itself to examining two favorite proof texts frequently marshaled in an effort to defend situationism. [Additional proof texts (e.g., 2 Chronicles 30:18-20; Matthew 12:1-8; 1 Corinthians 6:12; 10:23, the notion of “legalism”) are examined in a lengthier, unabridged version of this article, which can be found on-line at www.apologeticspress.org/rr/rr2004/r&r0411b.htm.]

“What about the woman taken in adultery? Didn’t Jesus free her from the rigid restrictions of the Law?” One of the most misused, mishandled, and misapplied passages in the Bible is the narrative of the woman caught in adultery, recorded in John 8:1-11. [For a discussion of the technical aspects of this passage as a textual variant, see Metzger, 1968, pp. 223-224; 1971, pp. 219-222; McGarvey, 1974, p. 16; Woods, 1989, p. 162.] This passage has been used by situation ethicists (e.g., Fletcher, 1967, pp. 83, 133), libertines, and liberals to insist that God is not “technical” when it comes to requiring close adherence to His laws. The bulk of Christendom has abetted this notion by decontextualizing and applying indiscriminately the remark of Jesus: “He who is without sin among you, let him cast a stone at her first” (vs. 7). The average individual, therefore, has come to think that Jesus was tolerant and forgiving to the extent that He released the woman from the strictures of God’s law that called for her execution. They believe that Jesus simply “waved aside” her sin, and thereby granted her unconditional freedom and forgiveness—though the Law called for her death (Leviticus 20:10). After all, isn’t it true that Jesus places people “in the grip of grace” (Lucado, 1996)?

Those who challenge conclusions such as these are derided as “traditionalists” who lack “compassion,” and who are just like the “legalistic” scribes and Pharisees who cruelly accused the woman and wanted her handled in strict accordance with Mosaic Law. Did Jesus set aside the clear requirements of Mosaic legislation in order to demonstrate mercy, grace, and forgiveness? A careful study of John 8:1-11 yields at least three insights that clarify the confusion and misconception inherent in the popular imagination.

First, Mosaic regulations stated that a person could be executed only if there were two or more witnesses to the crime (Deuteronomy 19:15). One witness was insufficient to invoke the death penalty (Deuteronomy 17:6). The woman in question was reportedly caught in the “very act” (vs. 4), but nothing is said about the identity of the witness or witnesses. There may have been only one, thereby making execution illegal.

Second, even if there were two or more witnesses present to verify the woman’s sin, the Old Testament was equally explicit concerning the fact that both the woman and the man were to be executed (Deuteronomy 22:22). Where was the man? The accusing mob completely sidestepped this critical feature of God’s Law, demonstrating that this trumped-up situation obviously did not fit the Mosaic preconditions for invoking capital punishment. Obedience to the Law of Moses in this

instance actually meant letting the woman go!

A third consideration that often is overlooked concerning this passage is the precise meaning of the phrase “He who is without sin among you...” (vs. 7). If this statement were to be taken as a blanket prohibition against accusing, disciplining, or punishing the erring, impenitent Christian, then this passage flatly contradicts a host of other passages (e.g., Romans 16:17; 1 Corinthians 5; Galatians 6:1; 2 Thessalonians 3:6,14; Titus 3:10; 2 John 9-11). Jesus not only frequently passed judgment on a variety of individuals during His tenure on Earth (e.g., Matthew 15:14; 23; John 8:44, 55; 9:41; et al.), but He also enjoined upon His followers the necessity of doing the same thing (e.g., John 7:24). Peter could be very direct in assessing people’s spiritual status (e.g., Acts 8:23). Paul rebuked the Corinthians’ inaction concerning their fornicating brother: “Do you not judge those who are inside?...Therefore put away from yourselves that wicked person” (1 Corinthians 5:12-13, emp. added). Obviously, Paul demanded that Christians must judge (i.e., make an accurate evaluation of) a fellow Christian’s moral condition. Even the familiar proof text so often marshaled to promote laxity (i.e., “Judge not, that you be not judged”—Matthew 7:1) records Jesus admonishing disciples: “...then you will see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother’s eye” (vs. 5). The current culture-wide celebration of being nonjudgmental (cf. “I’m OK—You’re OK”) is clearly out of harmony with Bible teaching.

So Jesus could not have been offering a blanket prohibition against taking appropriate action with regard to the sins of our fellows. Then what did His words mean? What else could possibly be going on in this setting so as to completely deflate, undermine, and terminate the boisterous determination of the woman’s accusers to attack Him, by using the woman as a pretext? What was it in Christ’s words that had such power to stop them in their tracks—so much so that their clamor faded to silence and they departed “one by one, beginning with the oldest” (vs. 9)?

Most commentators suggest that Jesus shamed them by forcing them to realize that “nobody is perfect and we all sin.” But this motley crew—with their notorious and repeatedly documented hard-heartedness—would not have been deterred if Jesus simply had conveyed the idea that, “Hey, give the poor woman a break, none of us is perfect,” or “We’ve all done things we’re not proud of.” The heartless scribes and Pharisees were brazen enough to divert her case from the proper judicial proceedings, and to humiliate her by forcibly hauling her into the presence of Jesus, thereby making a public spectacle of her. Apparently accompanied by a group of complicit supporters, they cruelly subjected her to the wider audience of “all the people” (vs. 2) who had come to hear Jesus’ teaching. They hardly would have been discouraged from their objective by such a simple utterance from Jesus that “nobody’s perfect.”

So what is the answer to this puzzling circumstance? Consider two possibilities. First, it may be that Jesus was calling attention to their failure to follow legal protocol in dealing with the woman. He was challenging them for violating the law with regard to treatment of the woman, essentially condemning them as being incapable of making a solid legal case against her.

A second possibility is that Christ was striking at precisely the same point that Paul drove home to hard-hearted, hypocritical Jews in Rome: “Therefore you are inexcusable, O man, whoever you are who judge, for in whatever you judge another you condemn yourself; for you who judge practice the same things” (Romans 2:1, emp. added). Paul was especially specific on the very point with which Jesus dealt: “You who say, ‘Do not commit adultery,’ do you commit adultery?” (vs. 22). In other words, no person is qualified to call attention to another’s sin when that individual is in the ongoing practice of the same sin. Again, as Jesus previously declared, “Hypocrite! First remove the plank from your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck out of your brother’s eye” (Matthew 7:5). After all, it is the “spiritual” brother or sister who is in the proper position to restore the wayward (Galatians 6:1).

Consequently, in the context under consideration, it may well be that Jesus knew that the woman’s accusers were guilty of the very thing for which they were willing to condemn her. (It is not beyond the realm of possibility that the fellow with whom the woman had committed adultery was in league with the accusers.) Jesus was able to prick them with their guilt by causing them to realize that He knew that they, too, were guilty. The old law made it clear that the witnesses to the crime were to cast the first stones (Deuteronomy 17:7). The death penalty could not be invoked legally if the eyewitnesses were unavailable or ineligible. Jesus was striking directly at the fact that these witnesses were unqualified to fulfill this role since they were guilty of the same sin, and thus deserved to be brought up on similar charges. They were intimidated into silence and retreat by their realization that Jesus was privy to their own indiscretions—and possibly on the verge of divulging them publicly.

Observe carefully that, at the withdrawal of the accusers, Jesus put forth a technical legal question when He asked: “Woman, where are they? Did no man condemn thee?” (ASV), or “Woman, where are those thine accusers? Hath no man condemned thee?” (vs. 10, KJV). The reason for Jesus to verify the absence of the accusers who had brought the charges against the woman was that the Law of Moses mandated the presence of eyewitnesses to the crime before guilt could be established and sentence passed. The woman confirmed, “No man, Lord” (vs. 11). Jesus then affirmed: “Neither do I condemn you....” The meaning of this pronouncement was that if two or more witnesses to her sin were not able or willing to document the crime, then she could not be held legally liable, since neither was Jesus, Himself, qualified to serve as an

eyewitness to her action. The usual interpretation of “neither do I condemn you” is that Jesus was flexible, tolerant, and unwilling to be judgmental toward others or to condemn their sinful actions. Ridiculous! The Bible repudiates such thinking on nearly every page. Jesus was declaring the fact that the woman managed to slip out from under judicial condemnation on the basis of one or more legal technicalities. But, He said (to use modern-day vernacular), “You had better stop it! You were fortunate this time, but you must cease your sinful behavior!”

Incredible! These scribes and Pharisees were trying to catch Jesus in a trap. Yet Jesus, as was so often the case (e.g., Matthew 21:23-27), “turned the tables” on His accusers and caught them in a trap instead! At the same time, He demonstrated a deep and abiding respect for the governing beauty and power of law—the law that He and His Father had authored. Jesus was the only Person Who ever complied with Mosaic legislation perfectly (2 Corinthians 5:21; Hebrews 4:15). He never sought to excuse human violation of law, nor to minimize the binding and authoritative application of law to people. Any interpretation of any passage that depicts Jesus as violating the law of God in order to forgive or accommodate man is a false interpretation, as is any interpretation that relegates law to a status of secondary importance (cf. Deuteronomy 6:24; 10:13; Psalms 19:7-11; Romans 7:12). Jesus was not in sympathy with the permissive mindset of today’s doctrinally lax thinkers who soften doctrine and the binding nature of law in the name of “grace,” “freedom,” or “compassion.”

**SITUATIONIST PROOF TEXTS:
THE SPIRIT AND LETTER OF THE LAW**

But doesn’t the Bible make a legitimate distinction between the ‘letter of the law’ and the ‘spirit of the law’? It is argued that sometimes it is necessary, even mandatory, to violate the “letter of the law” in order to act in harmony with the “spirit of the law.” According to this line of thinking, those who insist that obedience to the law of God is always required without exception are “hung up on the letter of the law” instead of being led by the “spirit of the law” (cf. Hook, 1984, p. 42).

This perspective naturally breeds and nurtures a relaxed attitude toward obedience. It militates against a desire to be precise and careful in conformity to biblical teaching. One individual explained how his feelings of devotion to Jesus made him feel that as long as he maintained a close “sense of nearness” to Christ, he did not have to fret over “nit picky” concerns, like whether Christians should be meticulous in their obedience to the laws of the land. Another person avowed that she did not “sweat the small stuff,” since she was living her life in recognition of God’s grace, and felt certain that Jesus would “cut her some slack.” The “small stuff” to which she referred included such things as whether God will accept instrumental music in worship to Him, whether God will approve of unscriptural divorce and remarriage, and whether sprinkling may pass for New Testament baptism.

The primary passage in the New Testament marshaled in an effort to support the “spirit vs. letter” antithesis is Paul’s remarks to the church of Christ in Corinth (2 Corinthians 3:4-18). I urge the reader to pause and read the third chapter of Second Corinthians before reading the analysis that follows. Two phrases are typically excised from the context and used as proof texts to support a notion contrary to the chapter: “not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life” (vs. 6), and “where the Spirit of the Lord is, there is liberty” (vs. 17). These phrases are set forth by some as proof that Christians ought not to be too meticulous in conforming strictly to various New Testament directives. Those who suggest such assume that “letter” refers to the commands of God—the written statements of Scripture that specify and regulate human behavior. They also assume that “spirit” refers to one’s attitude or feelings. Hence, if the individual feels devoted, concerned, and sincere, he or she is deemed in line with “the spirit of the law.” On the other hand, the individual who appears inflexible and rigid, or overly concerned with strict obedience, is perceived to lack “compassion” and “sensitivity,” and too concerned with “the letter of the law.”

However, if a person takes the time to study God’s Word, and refrain from mishandling its intended meaning (Acts 17:11; 2 Corinthians 4:2; 1 Timothy 4:13; 2 Timothy 2:15), he or she will see that neither Paul nor any other inspired writer agreed with such thinking. In a pericope dealing with his apostolic ministry, Paul crafted a beautiful allegory—what D.R. Duncan once called “the most perfect antithesis to be found in the whole Bible” (1888, p. 349). By arranging the contrasting phrases of the antithesis into two columns, the Bible student is able more easily to grasp Paul’s intended meaning.

2 CORINTHIANS 3	
Old Covenant	New Covenant
	Ministers of the new

	covenant (vs. 6)
Of the letter (vs. 6)	Of the Spirit (vs. 6)
The letter kills (vs. 6)	The Spirit gives life (vs. 6)
Ministry of Death (vs. 7)	Ministry of Spirit (vs. 8)
Written/Engraved on stones (vs. 7)	
Ministry of condemnation (vs. 9)	Ministry of righteousness (vs. 9)
Glorious (vss. 7,9,11)	Much more glorious (vss.8-9,11)
Passing away (vs. 7)	Remains (vs. 11)
Veil on Moses's face (vs. 13)	Great boldness of speech (vs. 12)
Veil remains in reading O.T. (vs. 14)	Veil taken away in Christ (vs. 14)
Veil lies on their heart (vs. 15)	Veil taken away when one turns to the Lord (vs. 16)

Comparison of “the letter” vs. “the spirit” of the law (O.T./N.T.)

It should be immediately evident to the unbiased observer that “the two legs of the antithesis are the New Covenant in contrast with the Old Covenant” (Dungan, p. 268). Precisely the same meaning is conveyed by the same terminology in Paul’s letter to the Romans (2:29; 7:6). The Old Testament legal system, though an excellent system for what God had in mind (Romans 7:12), was unable to provide ultimate forgiveness for violations of law and, in that sense, “kills.” It took Jesus’ death on the cross to make “life” possible—i.e., actual cleansing from sin.

When one recognizes the existing contextual meaning, it becomes apparent that these verses have absolutely nothing to do with the alleged “spirit vs. letter” contention! In fact, the Bible nowhere postulates such a thing. Like all liberal thinking, one must refrain from thinking too much about it if one does not wish to see the absurdity and nonsensical nature of it. The

“spirit vs. letter” contrast is “better felt than told” gobbledygook that makes no sense. In an article titled “The Letter that Killeth,” written on April 3, 1897, J.W. McGarvey responded to this type of thinking:

Just once in the course of his writings Paul makes the declaration that “the letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life” (2 Corinthians 3:7); and no remark that he ever made has been applied in a greater number of unlicensed ways. If a man insists upon preserving some ordinance in the very form of its original appointment, such an ordinance as baptism or the Lord’s Supper, for example, he is accused of contending for the letter that killeth, while the man who makes the charge, and who changes the ordinance, claims that he is following the spirit that giveth life. All of that large class of writers who make free with the Scriptures while claiming to reverence their authority, employ this device to excuse their departures from the word of God, while those who remonstrate with them for their license are denounced as literalists or sticklers for the letter that killeth. In all these instances, it seems to be claimed that if you stick close to the ordinance as Christ gave it, you will kill somebody. The last example that attracted my attention was in connection with the number of elders that should be appointed in a church. The writer says: “It has been thought to be a greater evil to have a congregation without a plurality of elders than to have an eldership without the requisite qualifications;” and he adds: “This is to do violence to the spirit of the New Testament in an effort to be loyal to its letter.” But which, in this case, is the letter, and which is the spirit? To have a plurality of elders is certainly the letter of the New Testament; that is, it is the literal requirement; and the literal requirement also is to have elders of prescribed qualifications. Where, then, is the spirit as distinguished from the letter? Echo answers, Where? The writer was so in the habit of using this favorite expression where he wished to justify a departure from Scripture precedent that he evidently applied it in this instance from pure habit and without thought (1910, pp. 160-161).

Indeed, redefining the biblical expressions “spirit of the law” and “letter of the law” enables the situationist to promote his agenda under the cloak of Bible backing.

If one wishes to use the expression “the spirit of the law” to refer to a proper attitude, and “the letter of the law” to refer to compliance with the explicit dictates of Scripture, it certainly is true that a person can distort or disregard “the spirit of the law” while following carefully “the letter of the law.” A person may engage in external, rote compliance without heartfelt, genuine love for God and His will. But it is impossible to represent faithfully “the spirit of the law” (i.e., to have the right attitude) while acting out of harmony with the specific details of the law. When Jesus said, “If you love Me, you will keep My commands” (John 14:15), He pinpointed the fact that “love” for Him includes obedience. It is possible to obey and not love; but it is not possible to love and not obey. One may have good intentions in one’s religious pursuits, but if those religious actions are contrary to God’s specified will, the activity is unacceptable to God. The situationist’s claim that sincerity and feelings of “love” legitimize whatever action “love” takes, is in direct contradiction to Bible teaching.

Situationism, antinomianism (freedom from law), and liberalism (loosing where God has bound) share in common their mutual aversion to law keeping. Christians must not fall prey to these sinister forces that attempt to soften and obscure the clear call from God to render obedience to His directives. What He seeks from people is conformity to His laws out of hearts full of sincerity, earnestness, and love.