**Moral Relativism and Situation Ethics**

*Matthew 12:1-8*

**Introduction**

1. Paul warned Timothy of perilous times – **2 Timothy 3:1-5**
   1. ***“last days”*** – the gospel age – even during the reign of Christ, when His glorious kingdom has come, and we receive the realization of all that was typified in the OT there will be “perilous times.”
   2. Some of which will be engaged in by those who profess to be godly **(v. 5).**
   3. Ultimately, this is not new – **Amos 2:4-8; 3:1-2** (Judah and Israel – God’s people – named among heathen nations for transgressions – Damascus, Gaza, Tyre, Edom, Ammon, Moab)
2. While there is nothing new under the sun (**Ecclesiastes 1:9-10**), men continue to invent new ways of accomplishing the same old evil, or new ways to condone and promote the same old evil (**cf. Romans 1:28, 30** – ***“inventors of evil things”***).
3. This is especially noticeable in our country’s moral decline through very recent years. Such has even found its way into religious thought, of which we must beware.
4. The relativism adopted by the majority has given rise to greater degrees of immorality and jeopardized how many approach the authority of scripture.
5. Our Age of Moral Relativism
6. What is it?
   1. Relativism – the doctrine that knowledge, truth, and morality exist in relation to culture, society, or historical context, and are not absolute. (New Oxford American Dictionary)
   2. Rejection of truth – **cf. John 18:38**
   3. Truth, by nature, is absolute – if something is true, it means it is objectively “the case” (a definition for truth).
   4. Essentially, many reject the fundamental notion that there can be anything outside of our individual thoughts and experiences which contains within itself, independent of anything or anyone else, its own characteristics and qualities.
      1. Each matter is individually assessed, and regardless of the content of the assessment, is a valid assessment.
7. Why is the position taken?
   1. Such thought makes man the arbiter of his own life choices.
   2. **Judges 21:25** – did what was right in his own eyes.
   3. Any acceptance of an objective standard necessitates self-denial – **Mark 8:34; Matthew 26:39**
      1. When people become ***“lovers of themselves…[and] lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God” (2 Timothy. 3:2, 4)*** they refuse to submit to anything that would limit their desires (**cf. Galatians 5:17)**.
   4. Yet, every man is still created with a conscience (the alarm system given by God to deter man from doing what is learned as wrong and urge him to do what is right).
      1. However, the conscience can be seared, and misled – **1 Timothy 4:2; Ephesians 4:17-19**
      2. One of the ways they do this is by accepting the idea of relative truth, thus, moral relativism – ANYTHING CAN BE RIGHT OR WRONG BASED ON WHAT YOU PERSONALLY THINK OF IT.
      3. Irony – those who accept such usually contradict themselves by suggesting there are “some” things that are always wrong.
8. Why does it not work?
   1. Everything, from weighty matters to those insignificant, become simply matters of opinion.
   2. Biblically – opinions, or matters of indifference to God are to be left to each individual’s judgment without consequence, as God has not ruled either way on the matter – **Romans 14:3**
   3. With moral relativism, EVERYTHING BECOMES AN OPINION – such inevitably leads to more significant matters being subject to polar opposite conclusions. (not simply the eating of meats or not)
      1. Yet, the idea of such being “more significant matters” is evidence in itself of objectivity.
      2. EX: Pro-Choice vs. Pro-Life – each side argues from what they believe to be an inherent moral right (neither side thinks the issue is insignificant). With moral relativism, there is no right answer. (This is what we object to).
      3. ***“The way of a fool is right in his own eyes” (Proverbs 12:15).***
      4. ***“Every way of man is right in his own eyes” (Proverbs 21:2).***
   4. Such demonstrates that man is incapable of self-direction – **Jeremiah 10:23; Proverbs 14:12**
9. What are the consequences?
   1. The ultimate consequence of an individual’s acceptance of moral relativism is a ***“debased mind”*** – **Romans 1:28-32** – which in turn leads to all evil, of the lowest sort (because moral relativism is fabricated, not legitimate).
      1. ***“debased”*** – *adokimos* – unqualified, worthless, base (BDAG)
      2. Worthless to what degree – **Romans 1:26-27** – defying basic nature.
   2. The “debased mind” that supposes anything is right and good as long as such is desired will pervert the most basic understandings of human existence.
   3. In other words, with moral relativism, anything goes!
   4. The Christian must reject any and all forms of such.
10. Situation Ethics
11. A Type of Relativism Adopted by Many Who Profess to be Christians
    1. Situation Ethics – what is right or wrong is not determined by a fixed standard but varies with the specifics of any given situation.
    2. Joseph Fletcher – an Episcopalian priest and professor of social ethics – the “father” of “Christian” situation ethics (1905-1991).
       1. Author of “Situation Ethics”
       2. “As we shall see, Christian situation ethics has only one norm or principle or law (call it what you will) that is binding and unexceptionable, always good and right regardless of the circumstances. That is ‘love’ – the agape of the summary commandments to love God and the neighbor” (Joseph Fletcher, Situation Ethics, 30).
       3. “For the situationist there are no rules – none at all” (55); “Circumstances alter rules and principles” (29); “all laws and rules and principles and ideals and norms, are only contingent, only valid if they happen to serve love in any situation…the Christian chooses what he believes to be the demands of love in the present situation” (30, 55). “The new morality, situation ethics, declares that anything and everything is right or wrong, according to the situation” (124). (Ibid.)
       4. Gave the example of a German woman who, being separated from her husband and imprisoned in Ukraine, committed adultery with a guard to become impregnated, leading to her release from prison to be reunited with her family. (As such was one of the only reasons for the Russians to release prisoners, along with severe medical treatment.) (Fletcher says such was a loving act.)
    3. Many in the religious world have adopted such as their “code of ethics.” Even if they would suggest its logical end is too extreme.
       1. “It’s all about love.”
       2. “God knows my heart. He knows I love Him.” Etc.
12. Supposed Authority for Situation Ethics
    1. **Mathew 12:1-8** – a suggested text lending credence to situation ethics. (Ultimately would place Jesus as the “father” of situation ethics.)
    2. Interpretation for situation ethics:
       1. **(v. 2)** – their accusation was accurate – they were breaking Sabbath law.
       2. **(vv. 3-4)** – David is used as an example of doing something that was ***“not lawful,”*** but excused by the situation. (**cf. 1 Samuel 21**)
          1. Human welfare overrides the laws of God.
       3. **(v. 5)** – The priests break Sabbath law continually, but the situation allows for it.
       4. Thus, Jesus approved what was unlawful based on the specific circumstance.
    3. What was Jesus really saying?
       1. NOTE: We must first understand a fundamental truth about sin, and Jesus which cannot be contradicted with our approach to the text.
          1. Sin is transgression of God’s law – **1 John 3:4**
          2. Jesus condemned sin, and the leading of men into sin – **Matthew 5:19**
          3. Jesus never sinned – **Hebrews 4:15**
          4. If we interpret the text in a way which has Jesus acknowledging transgression of law, but excusing it due to the circumstances, WE HAVE JESUS TEACHING THAT SIN IS OKAY IN THAT GIVEN CIRCUMSTANCE.
       2. **(v. 2)** – Jesus does not grant them their claim at all.
          1. **Deuteronomy 23:25** – basic act was lawful.
          2. Did doing it on the Sabbath make it unlawful? No.
          3. Tradition of elders went beyond what the Law required regarding the Sabbath.
             1. **Cf. John 7:21-24** – regarding their judgment against Him for healing a man on the Sabbath (chapter 5).
          4. **(v. 7)** – Jesus called the disciples guiltless.
       3. **(vv. 3-4)** – Jesus noted what David did was ***“not lawful.”***
          1. We see the Pharisees intentions later – **(vv. 10, 14)** – ***“that they might accuse Him…plotted against Him”***
          2. Jesus is showing an inconsistency in them.
          3. Although what David did was unlawful, THEY DO NOT EVEN DARE TO ACCUSE HIM OF WRONG, BUT EXCUSE HIM.
          4. Yet, they condemn the disciples even though they are not wrong.
             1. If they truly believe what the disciples are doing is wrong…
             2. Why don’t they judge Jesus by the same standard? (not that it is right)
          5. Other inconsistencies – **Matthew 11:16-19** – rejecting John then Jesus.
       4. **(vv. 5-6)** – Jesus showed by the lawful work of priests on the Sabbath that the law did not condemn ALL work on the Sabbath.
          1. ***“blameless”*** – which means ***“profane”*** is only used as it pertains to what might seem, according to the Pharisees tradition, to be so.
          2. The general law of Sabbath was modified by the specific law of the temple service.
          3. **(v. 6)** – the disciples were ultimately engaged in the work of the Messiah’s mission, who is greater than the Temple.
       5. **(v. 8)** – Jesus is the one who created Sabbath law, and knows better than any that such is not a violation.
    4. Only a tortured interpretation of the text – twisting the scripture – can yield even a semblance of situation ethics.
13. The Standard of Ethics Christ Established
    1. Joseph Fletcher – “Christian situation ethics has only one norm or principle or law…that is binding and unexceptionable, always good and right regardless of the circumstances. That is ‘love’”
    2. Love is indeed the “binding and unexceptionable” standard. But why?
       1. **Matthew 22:36-40** – all the Law hangs on these two commandments.
       2. **John 14:15** – Love Jesus/God – keep commandments.
       3. **1 John 5:1-2** – Love each other – keep commandments.
    3. Joseph Fletcher – “the Christian chooses what he believes to be the demands of love in the present situation”
       1. **Philippians 1:9-11** – love abounding in knowledge, discernment, approve excellent, without offense, fruits of righteousness…by Jesus Christ.
       2. I.e. love is not dictated by the Christian, but by Christ, and it is the Christian’s duty to submit to the love of Christ – THIS TAKES KNOWLEDGE OF GOD’S WILL, AND THE ABILITY TO DISCERN.
    4. It is not an arbitrary love that the Lord will judge us by in the end.
    5. HE WILL JUDGE US BY THE LAW OF CHRIST, AND WHETHER WE’VE LIVED ACCORDINGLY – **John 12:48; Romans 2:16**

**Conclusion**

1. God has not left the dictates of right and wrong in the hands of fallible man to decide in any given situation.
2. He has given us a fixed, eternal law which must be obeyed in order to be right with Him.
3. If we reject God’s standard, we have no basis for asserting anything to be evil or good.
4. We must beware of the wiles of the Devil in moral relativism and situation ethics which surround us.