

Did Jesus Endorse Situation Ethics?

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"At that season Jesus went on the sabbath day through the grainfields; and his disciples were hungry and began to pluck ears and to eat. But the Pharisees, when they saw it, said unto him, 'Behold, thy disciples do that which it is not lawful to do upon the sabbath.' But he said unto them, 'Have ye not read what David did, when he was hungry, and they that were with him; how he entered into the house of God, and ate the showbread, which it was not lawful for him to eat, neither for them that were with him, but only for the priests?'"

So reads the inspired narrative of Matthew's Gospel record (12:1-4). There are those who employ this narrative as biblical precedent for the philosophy of situation ethics.

Situation ethics is the notion that there are no absolute rules governing "right" and "wrong." Rather, all human activity is determined by the situation of the moment - supposedly guided by "love" alone. The aforementioned case regarding Israel's great king is cited as authoritative for this concept of human conduct.

On a certain occasion, David and his men were hungry (see 1 Sam. 21:6). In a time of crisis, they resorted to eating the sacred bread that was reserved for priests. This act was not lawful, but the desperation of the hour justified the conduct - so we are told.

It is alleged that Jesus himself cited with approval what David did. Supposedly, Christ endorsed David's practice of situation ethics, and, thereby, justified the law-breaking conduct of his own disciples.

Joseph Fletcher contended that Jesus "blessed David's act on the basis of the situation." And so, he argued, it is clear that: "Only the end justifies the means: nothing else" (p. 133; cf. pp. 85, 86).

The narrative in Matthew 12 does not provide support for the dogma of situation ethics. On a certain Sabbath day, the Lord and his disciples were passing through a grain field. The disciples, being hungry, began to pluck grain and eat it. Certain Pharisees saw this, and charged the Savior's men with breaking the law of Moses.

Did the disciples violate divine law? They did not. Admittedly, they transgressed the uninspired "traditions" of the Jewish elders, but they had not broken the law of God. Alfred Edersheim, himself of Jewish extraction, carefully discussed this passage. He observed that the disciples' conduct "was not a breach of the Biblical, but of the Rabbinic Law" (p. 56).

Additionally, it is not accurate to suggest that Jesus endorsed David's conduct in partaking of the showbread, which only priests were authorized to eat. In fact, just the opposite is true. The Lord said that Israel's king ate that "which it was not lawful for him for him to eat" (4). Could a statement be plainer?

That, then, brings us to this question. Why did Christ introduce the case of David and the temple-bread?

The use of this Old Testament illustration is an example of a form of reasoning known as Ad hominem argument. An Ad hominem (literally meaning, "to the man") argument is not made for the purpose of establishing positive truth. Rather, it is employed to highlight an opponent's inconsistency. The Lord's point may be paraphrased as follows: "You Pharisees revere David as a great king and Hebrew hero. David once broke the law of Moses by the illegal consumption of sacred food. But you do not condemn him for that! By way of contrast, my disciples have violated only your silly traditions – yet you charge them with sin. How very inconsistent you are!"

J.W. McGarvey described the matter in this fashion:

“Now the real argument of Jesus is this: David, when hungry, ate the show-bread, which it was confessedly unlawful for him to eat, yet you justify him: my disciples pluck grain and eat it on the Sabbath, an act which the law does not forbid, and yet you condemn them” (p. 104).

This incident contains not a vestige of support for the concept of situation ethics. Those who attempt to justify situation ethics by the use of Matthew 12:1ff have totally misconstrued the force of Christ's argument.