

Biblical Examples of Situation Ethics

1. **What** are the biblical examples of situation ethics?

The biblical examples of situation ethics are Bible texts that appear to support the working principles and propositions of situation ethics or show it in practice. Although the Bible contains numerous examples across both testaments, New Testament examples are of principal importance for two reasons. First, Christians place New Testament teachings above Old Testament teachings. Second, Jesus (c. 4 BCE - 33 CE) inspired the New Testament authors, including Paul the Apostle (c. 5-65 CE) and the gospel writers. Consequently, Christians are most interested in the biblical examples of situation ethics documented in the gospels and the letters of Paul the Apostle.



The gospels: the books of the Bible in which most of Jesus's teachings are recorded.

Jesus: according to the authors of the Gospel of Matthew, the Gospel of Mark, the Gospel of Luke, and the Gospel of John, some of the most famous biblical examples of situation ethics come from the mouth of Jesus. These include several statements about the importance of agape to ethical decision-making and the justification of Jesus's own situationist actions.

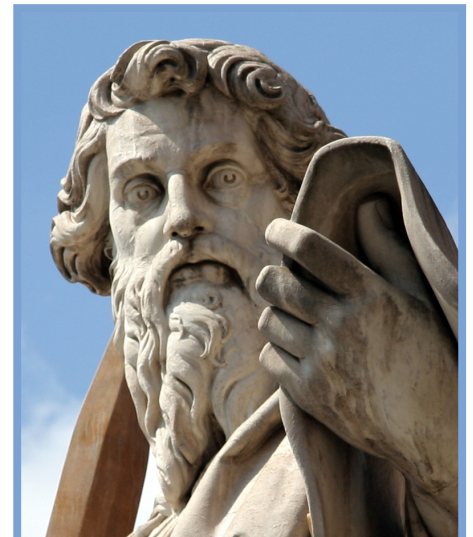
Paul the Apostle: in his letters, Paul the Apostle repeated the teachings of Jesus about the importance of agape to ethical decision-making and commanded Christians to practice situation ethics in some places (although he did not refer to it using this term). It is from Jesus and Paul the Apostle that the biblical examples of situation ethics get their authority.

2. **How** do the biblical examples of situation ethics work?

The biblical examples of situation ethics support this normative ethical theory by establishing the importance of agape to ethical decision-making, reducing the Torah to the commandment to love one's neighbour as oneself, and providing models of situation ethics in practice.

Jesus and Paul the Apostle both established the importance of agape to ethical decision-making. In John 15:9, Jesus says to his disciples, "As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love." John 15 in general, and this verse in particular, underscores the centrality of agape to Christian ethics. Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 13:13, Paul the Apostle wrote the famous words, "And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love." Like the words of Jesus, verses like these clarify the importance of agape by placing it at the heart of ethical concern for Christians.

Additionally, Jesus and Paul the Apostle claimed that the commandment to love one's neighbour summarises the Torah. In Mark 12:28-31, Jesus says of the most important commandments, "The first is... you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." This claim is affirmed by Paul the Apostle in Galatians 5:14: "For the whole of the law is summed up in a single commandment. 'You shall love your neighbour as yourself.'"



Paul the Apostle

Finally, Jesus and Paul the Apostle acted or advocated for situation ethics at different times. When Jesus broke the sabbath commandments by providing food or working healings, he defended his actions with the words, "The sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath." Likewise, in Romans 14:14, Paul the Apostle commanded Christian readers to abandon dietary laws with the situationist formula, "I know and am persuaded in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but it is unclean for anyone who thinks it unclean." Surprisingly, these read like words that could have been written by Joseph Fletcher.

3. **Why** are the biblical examples of situation ethics important?

The biblical examples of situation ethics are very important for one major reason: they justify the adoption of a compromise position in Christian ethics between legalism and antinomianism, both of which it is difficult to believe either Jesus or Paul the Apostle ever intended to advocate. Although there are powerful passages in both the letters and the gospels in which following the commandments of the Torah appear to be emphatically endorsed, legalism can only be justified when these passages are taken out of context. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said: "Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfil." However, this must be understood alongside his wider commentary on the Torah, which reduced the commandments to two simple maxims: love God and love your neighbour. As Joseph Fletcher and John Robinson rather persuasively argued, Jesus and Paul the Apostle did not think of their teaching as the end of law but as the end of legalism. Additionally, there are three other reasons why the biblical examples of situation ethics are important. First, they draw attention to historically overlooked teachings, especially those ignored by Christianity's more legalistic wings (e.g. the Catholic Church). Second, situation ethics is left entirely unsupported without these examples, at least for Christian situationists. Third, they reveal that legalism is incompatible with several pieces of biblical teaching.



The Sermon on the Mount: the most famous collection of Jesus's ethical teachings.

George Thinks

Ultimately, the biblical examples of situation ethics are important because they sanction it as a normative ethical theory. There's nothing more important for Christian situationists than the belief that situation ethics is the approach to moral dilemmas promoted by Jesus. Today, the so-called "new morality" isn't as popular among academics as it was in the 1960s, yet it retains a peculiar appeal. This begs one big question: why? Beyond the fact that there are plenty of areas in which popular opinion diverges from expert opinion, I think there's one big reason. When people ask themselves earnestly, "what would Jesus do?" they are rarely in an encounter with a moral dilemma they can resolve by rigidly following the rules. In the popular imagination, there's a widespread and, I believe, accurate perception that Jesus was just a little bit anarchic. This is what situation ethics captures, a flavour of Jesus's ethical priorities, which were, on any fair reading of the text, respectful of the commandments but not entirely subservient to them (especially not at the expense of people).

