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The New Morality

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**THE
NEW
MORALITY**



During recent months much attention has been given to a new approach to the question of law and love. A new philosophy is set forth in a book entitled *Situation Ethics, The New Morality* by Joseph Fletcher of Episcopal Theological School, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Dr. Fletcher places love in the place of law as the standard of morality. He declares, "anything and everything is right and wrong, depending on the situation."—Page 124. He and his fellow "situationists," as they call themselves, are "prepared in any situation to compromise them [ethical laws] or set them aside *in the situation*, if love seems better served by doing so."—Page 26. Fletcher rejects all "revealed" norms or laws but the one command "to love God in the neighbor. The situationist follows a moral law or violates it according to love's need."—Page 26.

It is interesting to note that Fletcher consistently misquotes the Biblical "summary," as he calls it—"Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself." Luke 10:27. Fletcher accepts as his norm loving God *in the neighbor*. This apparently inconsequential change in wording excludes God as an object of man's *direct love*. Advocates of the new morality give God a very nebulous place in their scheme. He is neither Creator, Lawgiver, Redeemer, nor Judge. There are no revealed laws, no divine sanctions, hence no need of forgiveness or redemption.

In many instances Fletcher is correct in deploring the legalistic attitude of some Christians. He is right in emphasizing love—the *agape* of the New Testament—as the dynamic principle of Christianity. But he misses the mark in abandoning law, in forsaking the concepts of right and wrong, and in leaving all moral decisions to the individual's interpretation of love.

For example, in his discussion of the Ten Commandments, Fletcher declares, "But situation ethics has good reason to hold it as a *duty* in some situations to break them, *any or all of them*."—Page 74. Every thoughtful person will agree that circumstances may arise that justify deviation from the letter of the law in deference to human values. For example, any amount of work on the Sabbath may be justified if a life is at stake. Jesus made this principle clear. But Jesus would surely take issue with the following statement:

"How shall we respond to the question whether extramarital sex is always wrong? Or even *paid sex*? Women have done it to feed their families, to pay debts, to serve their countries in counterespionage, to honor a man whom they could not marry. Are we entitled to say that, depending on the situation, those who break the seventh commandment of the old law, even whores, *could* be doing a good thing—if it is for love's sake, for their neighbor's sake? In short, is there any real 'law' of universal weight? The situationist thinks not."—Page 146.

This resolution of the law-love dilemma is definitely

unsatisfactory to the Christian who respects the Bible as the Word of God.

What, then, should be the attitude of modern Christians toward law? Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount that He did not come to destroy law—that law is eternal. Fletcher brushes aside this statement with the impatient comment: "Literalizers and fundamentalists take these phrases, however inconsistent they are with the rest of the Gospels and with Paul's letters, as a law requiring a law."—Page 70.

But Jesus' statement is *not* inconsistent with the rest of the Gospels or with Paul. Jesus' statement expresses one side of the great law-love balance that exists throughout the Bible. The law of God is eternal and valid; but it must be interpreted and applied in harmony with the fundamental principle of God's government—love. Man needs law as a check on his natural impulses to violence, promiscuity, and untruthfulness. Man needs love to control his self-centeredness. Law without love breeds legalism. Love without law breeds sentimentalism.

The so-called "new morality" has a great deal to say about love—much of which is meaningful; but it fails to emphasize the highest manifestation of human love—love for God. Such love will result in respect for law.

Jesus said "If ye love Me, keep My commandments." John 14:15. But the commandment keeping prompted by Christian love for God and man will not be like that of the Pharisees—narrow, bigoted, legalistic, concerned over trifles. As Paul says, "The law is good, if a man use it lawfully." 1 Timothy 1:8.

In the second chapter of Revelation is recorded a "letter" written by the Lord to the Christian church at Ephesus. The Ephesian church is commended for its good works, its endurance, and its orthodoxy. Surely Ephesus was a model, law-abiding church. Their standards were high, and their conduct was impeccable. But something was wrong. The Lord said to this church, "You have abandoned the love you had at first." Revelation 2:4, R.S.V. Love and law cannot be separated. The Christian church in the twentieth century, like that in the first, must be loving as well as energetic and orthodox.

The two concepts of law and love stand out like twin peaks in the Bible. There can be no responsible interpretation of either Old or New Testament without recognizing *both* of these great categories of truth.

Some would have us believe that the Old Testament is the testament of law. They point to the Ten Commandments and to the legal and liturgical codes of the Pentateuch in proof of their position. It is true that God expressed His will in legal propositions in many instances; but the Old Testament contains much more than law.

God's relationship with Abraham is an example of love in Old Testament times. When God called Abraham to leave his homeland, He recognized the emotional trauma involved, and He reassured His (Continued on page 30)

"Situation Ethics" and the Ten Commandments True Balance of Law and Love

by Norval F. Pease, Professor of Applied Theology, Andrews University

calling out from the depths of despair, "God is an illusion; God is dead."

There are those who say it is impossible to be a Christian in a social order such as ours.

But let us reflect upon the kind of witnessing that was done in the days of the apostolic church.

Politically, it was the day of the Caesars. Rome ruled with an iron hand. Everywhere there was extortion, intolerance, cruelty. The masses were poverty-stricken. Only the few were comfortable and wealthy. Instead of machinery in mines, workshops, and ships, slaves did the work, shackled to their benches and driven by the lash.

Religiously, it was a time of rampant paganism and emperor worship. Much of the persecution suffered by the early Christians was because they refused to render to the emperor the honors that belong to God.

Illiteracy was widespread. Hospitals were nonexistent. Means of communication such as we know today were not even imagined. The gospel was taken on sandled feet down dusty roads.

Yet a handful of followers of the Way were so filled with love for God and man that in less than a generation they had turned the world upside down.

So clearly did the early Christians let their light shine that when they were cast into prison, their jailers asked, "What must I do to be saved?"

So brightly did they glorify their Father in their daily lives that many persons of wealth and distinction gave up their treasures and status symbols, accepted estrangement from family and friends, and cast their lot with the outcasts.

So dedicated and consecrated were they that kings, listening to them, trembled. One king, Agrippa, visibly shaken, said to Paul, "Almost thou persuadest me to be a Christian."

What was the secret of the effective witnessing of these early Christians? What made them willing to accept hardship, persecution, and even death in order to fulfill the gospel commission?

The answer is to be found in the book of Acts. Peter and John had been brought before the Sanhedrin. A few days earlier they had healed the lame man at the gate of the temple. They had healed him in the name of Jesus of Nazareth and in so doing had incurred the wrath of the religious leaders.

As the members of the Sanhedrin watched them and listened to them, they became aware of something and marveled. Acts 4:13 tells us that the learned group "took knowledge of them, that they had been with Jesus." To the Sanhedrin it seemed as though Jesus were again living before their eyes in the person of His followers.

"They had been with Jesus." That was the secret of their power. That was why their faith was strong, their convictions deep. That was why they were willing to suffer "the loss of all things" for the gospel's sake and to accept "cruel mockings and scourgings, . . . bonds and imprisonment."

So will it ever be with His true followers, whether in the apostolic age or the space age.

Today we cannot be with Jesus personally. We cannot walk with Him along the shores of Galilee or sit beside Him on the Mount of Olives. We cannot see Him heal the

sick or raise the dead. But we can still be with Jesus in the way that has been prescribed for those who would be His followers after the ascension. We can be with Him, learn of Him and of His will for our lives through daily study of the Scriptures and through quiet hours alone with Him. By faith we can receive into our lives the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, the "effective helper in restoring the image of God in the human soul."

Having appropriated the power of God into our lives, we, too, shall be effective witnesses, no longer "empties drifting by." Imbued with love for God and love for man, our lives will reveal the sweet graces of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, long-suffering, gentleness, faith, and charity.

Then no longer will the world say: "We look at you but see only our own image. We listen to you but hear only a playback of our own voices."

When our lives have become changed, men will take knowledge of us that we have been with Jesus. Then truly we shall be effective witnesses for Him. [END]

The New Morality

(Continued from page 13)

servant by reminding him of the great reward at the end of the adventure. When Abraham arrived in his new home, God soothed his loneliness by appearing to him again and repeating His promises of divine care and eventual triumph.

When Abraham's feelings were trampled by his ungrateful nephew, Lot, his concern and disappointment were relieved by a visit from his Lord who repeated the promises once more. Later, when Abraham was drawn into war with surrounding tribes, it was God who said, "Fear not." When Abraham found his family affairs complicated as a result of his own mistakes, his divine Friend said to him, "I am God Almighty; walk before Me, and be blameless." And, finally, when Abraham's loyalty to God had been severely tested, God sent him a message of congratulation because he had not failed his examination.

All of these experiences reveal a loving and caring God; a God whose concern reaches far beyond the realm of law. On occasion we see men and women in Old Testament times who possessed a love like that of their God. Where, for example, could greater love be found than in Moses' plea for his very difficult and unappreciative people: "Yet now, if Thou wilt forgive their sin—; and if not, blot me, I pray Thee, out of Thy book which Thou hast written"? Exodus 32:32. Or where could a more beautiful expression of filial love be found than that of Ruth for Naomi: "Entreat me not to leave thee, or to return from following after thee: for whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge: thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God: where thou diest, will I die, and there will I be buried: the Lord do so to me, and more also, if aught but death part thee and me"? Ruth 1:16, 17.

We also see in the Old Testament adequate provision for forgiveness of sin, loving consideration for the poor, great social concern in the teachings of the prophets. Some of the religious leaders of that far-distant day sensed the balance between law and love. Listen to Micah: "He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the

Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Micah 6:8, R.S.V.

As in all ages, not all of God's church in the Old Testament caught the idea of love. There were the cruel, the vindictive, the legalistic. But God was trying to teach mankind that life is best lived when law and love are kept in proper balance.

When our Lord came to this world, He found a generation of devout people who placed an unbalanced emphasis on law. They interpreted the laws of God without recognizing the love of God. They conceived of salvation as the result of meticulous obedience to law with little or no concern for people and their needs. All about the Master were exceedingly zealous people, vying with each other to see how exactly they could fulfill every legal demand, but lacking quite completely the motive of love.

One day a scribe asked Jesus, "Which is the first commandment of all?" Jesus answered by giving the two great foundations of divine law: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these." Mark 12:30, 31.

To men who made a fetish of the Sabbath, He said, "It is lawful to do good on the Sabbath." To those who interpreted in great detail the command, "Thou shalt not kill," He said in effect, "Thou shalt not hate." To those who were ready to stone an adulteress, He revealed His willingness to forgive, but He also said, "Go, and sin no more." He vexed His contemporaries by His lack of concern for the tradition that had become part of the culture of the time; but He always stretched out a helping hand and spoke a loving word.

In course of time a great legalist, Saul of Tarsus, was converted and became Paul, the evangelist. The burden of his message was that law would not save; but even he declared that God's law is "holy, just, and good." Romans 7:12. The great persecutor was so transformed by the gospel that he wrote the hymn of love which declares that love is greater than tongues, prophecy, knowledge, or faith. And in the same letter to the Corinthian church he says, "Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong. Let all that you do be done in love." 1 Corinthians 16:13, 14, R.S.V. This text is a meaningful commentary on the relationship between law and love. Law demands watchfulness, firmness, faith, courage. But without love these virtues lose their meaning. Christianity demands that its followers "do" many things; but it insists, "Let all that you *do* be done in love."

The relationship between God's moral law and God's love is expressed by one author as follows:

"The precepts of the Decalogue are adapted to all mankind, and they were given for the instruction and government of all. Ten precepts, brief, comprehensive, and authoritative, cover the duty of man to God and to his fellowman; and all based upon the great fundamental principle of love. 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind; and thy neighbor as thyself.' . . . In the Ten Commandments these principles are carried out in detail,

and made applicable to the condition and circumstances of man."—E. G. White, *Patriarchs and Prophets*, page 305.

This is the "old morality," and it has never lost its relevance. It is "situationist" to the extent that it does not overlook the "condition and circumstances of man," but the final authority is in the hands of God, not man. It is not "legalistic," for love is its source—not erring, immature human love, but divine love. Regarding the "new morality," it may be aptly said that what is new is not good, and what is good is not new. What the church needs today is not the "new morality" but a new dedication to the eternal law of love. [END]

No Need to Despair

(Continued from page 20)

Their very selves. Their families. It was almost too good to be true.

But it *was* true. And it *is* true. The sun will shine again!

Writing to the church at Corinth, the apostle Paul said, "Listen! I will unfold a mystery: we shall not all die, but we shall all be changed in a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet-call. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will rise immortal, and we shall be changed. This perishable being must be clothed with the imperishable, and what is mortal must be clothed with immortality. And when our mortality has been clothed with immortality, then the saying of Scripture will come true: 'Death is swallowed up; victory is won!' 'O Death, where is your victory? O Death, where is your sting?'" 1 Corinthians 15:51-55, N.E.B.

The promise of life through Christ takes the poisonous, soul-destroying sting out of death. It makes the darkened future glow with new hope. It makes despair impossible.

This is what Paul wrote to the church at Thessalonica: "We want you not to remain in ignorance, brothers, about those who sleep in death; you should not grieve like the rest of men, who have no hope. We believe that Jesus died and rose again; and so it will be for those who died as Christians; God will bring them to life with Jesus.

"For this we tell you as the Lord's word: we who are left alive until the Lord comes shall not forestall those who have died; because at the word of command, at the sound of the Archangel's voice and God's trumpet-call, the Lord Himself will descend from heaven; first the Christian dead will rise, then we who are left alive shall join them, caught up in clouds to meet the Lord in the air. Thus we shall always be with the Lord. Console one another, then, with these words." 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18, N.E.B.

Here indeed is consolation. Here is a hope which the despairing can grasp and find new joy in life.

Christ will return. The dead will rise again. The living will meet their loved ones once more. Together they will be "caught up" to meet the Lord. Together they will go to the beautiful dwelling place He has prepared for them. And together they will remain, "always," forever and ever.

Here is a beautiful, glorious hope. It is the Christian hope, the blessed hope.

What good news for all who are sad today! [END]