



Integrating Your Faith into Your Military Career

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Military ethics is an extremely broad and complex topic.

When we think of ethics in the armed forces, we often think of rules of conduct. We also have expectations of other people's conduct in society - for instance, we expect them to tell the truth, be fair, keep their promises, be courteous, etc.

Someone once said that ethics is a way of adjudicating competing moral values. For example, suppose my wife and I invite you to dinner, but it turns out to be the most horrible dinner you've ever eaten. When, at the end of the meal, I ask, "What did you think of dinner?" you are immediately confronted by an ethical dilemma – honesty versus charity. So, **ethics often involves not "right versus wrong," but "right versus right."**

When we talk about ethics within a particular profession such as the military, we must look at the specific types of decisions and the unique situations that arise within that profession. While it may seem convenient to build a strict set of guidelines, the sheer number of possible situations makes it impossible to come up with a universal set of rigid rules. Rather than focus on formulaic solutions, it is wiser to focus on the development of character-based judgment. **Our goal should be that ethical behavior becomes a part of who we are. Then ethics is no longer a list of rules, but reflections of who we truly are.**

Not long ago I saw a little girl and her daddy walking together. The girl was skipping and singing a song to herself while she swung a large stick. Her father gently told her, "Put the stick down, dear." Amazingly, she obeyed immediately. She dropped it to the ground without missing a beat or note of her song. She didn't fight or argue— she just reflexively obeyed. Yet I noticed that her obedience didn't diminish her joy in any way – she kept on skipping and singing. It was clear that her real joy came from walking with her dad, not swinging the stick. When we think about ethics, we need to inculcate in ourselves a reflexive obedience to God our Father, so that when He puts us in a situation, we know what we should do, and we do it without diminishing our joy.

We often look at ethics from the perspective of big, tough questions -- such as what a young lieutenant should do if his or her commanding officer orders them to do something against his or her beliefs and morals. But many ethical situations military personnel face come up in much smaller ways and situations: honesty on reports, not trying to take credit, putting others first. Living ethically comes down to practicing ethics in the thousand little situations that come up in our day-to-day careers and lives.

My prayer is that we become more like that little girl was with her father. Reflexive obedience to the Scriptures and to the Holy Spirit's guidance helps form our consciences and our actions. It is being continually open to God's answer to the question, "What would Jesus do in this exact situation?" Reflexive obedience helps us see more clearly what we are called to do. If we focus all our thoughts on the big, tough ethical situations that will come our way, we may miss out on the many small decisions we need to make in order to be a truly honorable person.

Our home in Colorado Springs is a couple miles from the U.S. Air Force Academy. In one of the buildings there is a plaque that talks about their honor code. It states, "We are not content to produce officers who act honorably. Our intent is to produce officers who are, in fact honorable." There is a big difference being

“acting” and “being.” If we only act honorably to avoid punishment, or if we only do so out of pride, we aren’t truly being ethical. God wants us to develop righteous behavior that arises from deep within our spirits.

I just got back from a few hours of flying, and it reminded me that when we train young students to fly, we begin with basic maneuvers and then gradually combine those simple ones into more complicated maneuvers. The knowledge and skill we teach flight students enables them to perform in dangerous missions and deal with emergencies such as unexpected bad weather or mechanical failure. When we teach flight students, it’s important that they learn all the skills, not just some. If they fail to learn even one or two skills, it holds them back from learning the more complicated maneuvers. Similarly, ethical failures in small situations in our lives can seem trivial, but wrong actions in those instances can lead to bigger moral failures down the road. We must be completely devoted to learning all of God’s precepts so that He can transform our entire lives.

We have all seen leaders whose witness was compromised or rejected because of ethical failures such as sexual sins, cheating, or lying. There are an infinite number of ways to fail in our careers, and that infinity of opportunities to fail is one reason it is so hard to understand military ethics.

Military ethics involves integrating our faith day by day into the challenges we meet in our careers. At my first duty station, a retired army colonel told a group of us young Christians that we should always “fly our flag early.” He meant that we should not try to conceal our faith to win acceptance. It is important that others know where our moral foundation lies or else our testimony will be compromised and ineffective on the day that we finally stand up for what is right. He counseled us to integrate our faith into every facet of our responsibilities as military leaders and to behave with professional excellence and character in even the smallest matter. This provides both a warning to others and a reminder to ourselves to live by a higher calling of ethical behavior.

In teaching military ethics, we in ACCTS hope to help people integrate what Christianity really is into whatever role they are fulfilling in service to their country. Ethics is about character development and integrating Scriptures and the Holy Spirit’s guidance in their lives into who and what they are, deep down. We want to help create military men and women who have the character of Christ.

We are also working to create military men and women who can face challenges in their careers and in their personal lives without faltering or falling away from the truth. One of my acquaintances served as the commanding officer of the Marine Corps’ officer candidate school (OCS). He called OCS, “the world’s longest job interview.” It consisted of more than three months of grueling physical, mental, and psychological testing. Candidates endure sleep deprivation and physical exhaustion, and are frequently assigned tasks that are clearly impossible, and yet are punished for not completing them. They are confronted with leadership situations where someone will suffer, and given the chance to select whether it will be them or others. These “unreasonable” tasks are leveled on them for a reason – as a test of each candidate’s character.

Just like OCS, nothing shows the true character of a military Christian more than trials and difficulties in his or her life. Embracing ethical principles allows God to transform us and transform the nations in which we work.

This is at the core of what we strive to do and teach in ACCTS – helping military personnel in countries around the world to integrate their faith into their service in their armed forces so that they glorify God and help spread the gospel worldwide.

Discussion Questions

1. Why do you think that military ethics is not just about obeying moral rules?
2. Explain why ethics is not only about choosing a right path instead of a wrong path?
3. "Living ethically comes down to practicing ethics in the thousand little situations that come up in our day-to-day careers and lives." What are examples of "little situations" in your life?