



Preparing for Predictable Ethical Problems

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Ethical situations will arise for every young military person during their career. Sometimes a co-worker will ask you to do something that is morally questionable. Sometimes you will receive a direct order from a commanding officer which seems wrong, but disobeying it may put your career in jeopardy. And sometimes the very military system itself seems to invite unethical actions in the situations we find ourselves.

It's normal for young military Christians to feel ill-equipped and unprepared for these type of situations -- but no one can serve effectively (in the military or in our Christian lives) from a place of fear. You can, though, gain confidence in the tools and knowledge you have and in the God whom you serve. Trust Him and the wisdom you receive through Bible study and fellowship with other believers.

And even as you face these types of ethical dilemmas situations, you can know that God will speak through you if you seek His will; as Matthew 10 states: "I am sending you out like sheep among wolves. Therefore, be as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves. Be on your guard... do not worry about what to say or how to say it. At that time you will be given what to say, for it will not be you speaking, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you."

How do we prepare for ethical problems that may arise in our careers? The following framework is one I've used and may be useful to others:

- 1. Identify a potentially problematic situation** that may come up in your next assignment or career situation. Think of situations that may arise to tempt you to violate your own ethical standard, or situations that may lead you directly into sin. Write out the situation or situations you most want to prepare for.
- 2. Study God's Word to find biblical guidance** for the specific situation/area you may face so that you have a foundation for your actions in that situation. Biblical passages like the fruits of the Spirit list in Galatians 5 (love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control) and the 10 Commandments in Exodus are good starting points, but there will be many verses that will give guidance.
- 3. Brainstorm how to respond and act in the potential situation.** Ask, "What can I do in that situation? What should I say? How can I react to counter that?"

Think through and then write down *every* possible way of reacting or dealing with the situation and listing them out for consideration. At this stage of brainstorming, you aren't using judgment as to what is the right or wrong action – you are simply listing every possible action on the spectrum of possible actions, whether right or wrong. Write everything down, moving from one extreme of the spectrum ("take no action at all") to the other ("take this extreme action") and every choice in-between. As you write possible actions down, it will be obvious that the actions/responses on the extreme ends of the list won't be things you will do. Cross off those, then start working back toward the middle of the list, where you will probably find your best possibilities and options.

Brainstorming can also work well as you face your own personal problem areas – things you fear the most or things you want to work on and improve in your life. If, for instance, you fear losing your temper and becoming out of control, start a list with that at the top and begin writing down biblical, God-honoring reactions and actions you can take rather than acting in anger. In some situations, the Bible can give specific information (such as how Joseph literally ran from sexual temptation) while at times the biblical guidance will be more generic.

You may need to repeat this brainstorm processing as you continue in your career and new situations come up. When these new scenarios arise, remember to go back to the basics and ask the Holy Spirit to speak for you. Keep referring to the Christian's ultimate reference manual -- the Bible.

4. Act out, verbally and physically, the situation you believe you will face and how you will respond (“If *this* situation happens, then I need to do *this*.”) This step of imagining a possible situation step-by-step helps you practice and be well-prepared. Pilots call this “chair flying” – sitting down in a chair, with no expensive simulator, to go through an upcoming flight sequence from start to finish.

It will also help you to get involved with believers who can be trusted sources -- ethical mentors, pastors, and fellow Christians who can help you clarify what your dilemmas are.

When I started my military career in the fighter aircraft community, I joined a group of officers who were known for their partying, excessive alcohol use, and sexually immoral behaviors. Those things were expected in that community but were unacceptable to believers. When I was a navigator, one of my jobs was to track the time spent flying. In the flying world, flying time is one of the top metrics to show our skills – more advanced pilots had more flying hours. It was common for fighter pilots to ask navigators to “round up” – add a few minutes onto their time -- to their time flown. Adding a few minutes to our flight times doesn't seem like much, but over hundreds of sorties that “rounding up” equals many extra hours!

In my navigator role, I had multiple pilots ask me to round up their time. This created an ethical dilemma, because to me it was simply lying. Before I was even asked to do so, however, I developed a plan of action with a standard response: “No, that's okay – I'll just log what we fly.” I didn't become confrontational or make my statement into a moralizing sermon, but if they pressed I would say, “It's not worth violating my honor and values to add a tenth of an hour to the time.” They may have thought I was crazy for my response, but on occasion it led to further discussions. No matter what others think of us, we can choose to advance a value and honor that may make them stop and think of other perspectives and ways of doing things.

Making ethical and right decisions can be a messy and sometimes painful process in the imperfect world of the military. There are serious dilemmas officers at all levels in their career must face. We must pray for God's power and wisdom, as Ephesians 6 :10-17 tells us:

“Finally, be strong in the Lord and in his mighty power. Put on the full armor of God, so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes. For our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, to stand. Stand firm then, with the belt of truth buckled around your waist, with the breastplate of righteousness in place, and with your feet fitted with the readiness that comes from the gospel of peace. In addition to all this, take up the shield of faith, with which you can extinguish all the flaming arrows of the evil one. Take the helmet of salvation and the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God. And pray in the Spirit on all occasions with all kinds of prayers and requests.”

Discussion Questions:

1. What problematic, ethics-related situations have you faced in your military career, and how did you handle them? In retrospect, do you feel you handled those situations correctly or would you change your response if you could?
2. The author discussed a specific situation where he was expected to add minutes to pilots' flight times. How would you have handled that situation?
3. Have you used "brainstorming" as a way to think through situations beforehand? Does this seem like a technique that will help you in future situations? If so, think through Christians in your life who will be able to help you in these areas and give you biblical wisdom and be ready to ask for their help when needed.

Conversational Prayer: Spend time in conversational prayer, using your own words and speaking to Christ as your Redeemer and your friend. Ask Him which lessons from this devotional you most need to learn and apply in your own life. Use the Scripture verses in this devotional in your prayers.