

“When Faith Is Duty”

A mother walked past her young son’s room. She heard him praying. She listened ... and as she listened, she noticed that her son was praying in such a manner that he was telling God *what* he planned to do and then followed up with specific directions on *how* God could help him. She stuck her head into his room and interrupted him: “Son, don’t bother to give God instructions ... just report for duty!”

Duty. I actually wonder if her son understood what the word “duty” meant. If he was a Boy Scout, he may have been familiar with the word: “On my honor I will do my duty to God ...” Duty. We don’t hear or use the word “duty” much these days. Duty is a cousin of similar uninspiring words like drudgery, discipline, determination. Duty is a close kin to the Greek word “*doulos*” translated “slave” or as the RSV politely renders it ... “servant.” Unfortunately, we equate the word “duty” with negative expectations, because duty carries with it a sense of obligation. And people today ... well; people today don’t like to feel they are obligated to anything or to anyone. With so much emphasis on the self ... the focus on the “me, me, me” ... people want to be free to do their own things.

Duty. Duty, not being one of the glamour words, threatens self-aggrandizement, selfishness, narcissistic behavior. Duty, once honored by Victorian moralists and poets, has fallen on hard times, rendered a backseat status in ethical discourse. Some consider duty an inferior moral motivation. “Just do your duty!” When was the last time you heard that? Today, the main moral energies are sensitivity, feelings, spontaneity, doing what comes naturally, acting with independent courage, or careful, rational, weighing of the facts. But duty? Who does anything out of duty anymore?

Duty connotes blind obedience, mindless reaction, ethics that are nothing more than habit rather than a heroic choice, decision, independence, and reason ... and how we moderns admire choice, decision, independence, and reason. For example, parents who believe their young children are “rational creatures” (which they are not!) constantly ask them for their opinion or permission (*What would you like for dinner?*) versus having a plate of fried onions on top of baked liver put in front of you and your father saying, “You’re not leaving this table until your plate is clean or you can go to your room with no super at all!” Duty has the connotation of eating baked liver without expression or saying one word!

When Jesus taught the disciples a lesson on forgiveness, their immediate response was, “Well, Lord, if you want us to forgive that many times, you have to “increase our faith.” Upon hearing their request, Jesus responds with a parable that makes it clear that duty is an important characteristic for discipleship. In fact, there is an edge to sternness in Jesus’ voice when he speaks of duty to his disciples, a sternness likened to the English poet William Wordsworth’s definition of duty as “the stern daughter of the voice of God!” Jesus tells his disciples that it’s not a big deal to forgive a number of times. Servants are not to be thanked for doing what is right. Disciples do what is commanded of them, then say “We are unworthy servants ... we have only done what was our duty.”

Does that attitude sound too self-debasing? It is not! Jesus does not call people to become drones or doormats. What Jesus is saying is that there is no letup in the service of God. There is only the unremitting struggle against evil, ignorance, laziness, intolerance, illiteracy, selfishness, fear ... all the forces that run counter to God’s purpose in this world.

We must recognize that the struggle to keep faith is constant ... that we are always being pulled away from God. Our duty is to stay on guard ... on watch as to which way we are being pulled. It is too easy to relax our Christian principles and standards, and then find ourselves sucked into a situation that leads to compromising our values ... our ethics ... our calling. However, we are equipped to meet every challenge. We have the power of faith. Faith is just that ... a power that we can bring to bear on life situations. Faith is the greatest force in the world.

Jesus gives his disciples an example of faith as power when he teaches them a lesson on forgiveness. Though he mentions the number seven, Jesus is not referring to a calculated standard. The Christian standard for forgiveness is immeasurable and exceeds the best the world can achieve. Upon hearing this, the disciples ask Jesus to make their faith stronger. They know ... as you and I know ... that it takes almost unimaginable amount of faith to forgive some people. When we stop and think for a moment of people who have wronged us, and then know it is our Christian duty to forgive

them, immediately our prayer, too, is: *Lord, if you want me to forgive this person, you are going to have to give me a lot more faith!*

I find it fascinating that Jesus' response to his disciples, as well as to you and me is: you have enough faith ... more faith than you have ever tapped. Jesus seems to be saying ... that which looks completely impossible becomes possible, if it is approached with faith. We only have to ponder the number of scientific achievements over the last fifty years ... consider the changes in surgical procedures and operations ... the feats of endurance that have been achieved that were regarded as impossible (Appalachian State beating Michigan at Michigan ... and now Stanford beating USC last night at USC).

If you approach anything with the attitude that it can't be done ... it certainly won't be done. But if you approach challenges with the attitude "it must be done" ... there is a better chance that it will be accomplished. As people of faith ... as disciples of Jesus Christ, we must keep in mind that we approach no task alone, but that with us, there is God and all God's power! God has promised that the power of faith will prove adequate to the challenge. The task may seem impossible and the available resources may seem as inadequate as a grain of mustard seed ... but if we press to the limit what we actually have ... by God's grace it be enough ... it will be done!

Faith enables us to receive divine power and faith stretches according to need. Therefore, we are able to forgive those who have hurt us ... we are able to care for the weak even when it is inconvenient or we are just too tired. King George V of England once wrote: *In this world it is not so much doing what we like to do, as it is, to like what we have to do.* "If duty demands unceasing effort to fulfill the requirements of active discipleship, faith makes it possible and transmits our labor into joy."

Indeed, when we are called by God to serve in a situation that is unpleasant, inconvenient, unsatisfying, difficult, emotional, stressful ... as God's servants we go and do, because there is a time when faith is a duty ... that it is our duty to serve. When we learn of a situation in which we know we can be of help ... a situation in which we have the opportunity to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to bear upon the problem, we must not hesitate. Unfortunately, being so much into ourselves, we often question: "Why should I serve? Let someone else for a change do it!" Of course, in the back of our mind there is the question of "why" should we serve ... what is our motivation? For a reward? For praise? For special recognition! Ah duty ... "the stern daughter of the voice of God" ... will give us none! Why then give ourselves to such servile life?

Here is why ... service to God ... serving in the name of Jesus Christ is the best life there is. With the proper attitude, the right motivation, you will work for Christ whose yoke is easy and whose burden is light. You'll be in the center of God's will and reside in the kingdom of heaven. Being a disciple of Jesus Christ is the greatest life there is ... the most fulfilling, the most rewarding, and the most satisfying. Do it right ... do it faithfully ... and eventually the pay-off will be the Lord saying to you: "Well, done ... well done good and faithful servant ... enter now into the joy of Your master."

Duty recognizes our dependence on God for life and all that supports and makes life worth living. We recognize that we can never pay our debt to God for what has been done and is constantly being done for us. We honor God by doing our duty. You see, our duty is simply our debt to God. We are to remember that Jesus himself came to serve ... not to be served. Jesus was exceedingly compassionate to those who needed compassion ... and not because they deserved it. Jesus is living proof of God's grace.

When we serve God, we are to do our best. When we have done our best, we have done only our duty ... and a person who has done their duty has done only what ... in any event ... they are compelled to do. All we are and all we have belongs to the Lord by right. To serve him is our duty. And duty in Christ's service is an honor and a great privilege.

When faith is a duty, our motivation, our attitude, our behavior echo the words of that great hymn: *Were the whole realm of Nature mine; That were an offering far too small; Love so amazing, so divine, Demands my soul, my life, my all.* "On my honor, I will do my duty to God ..." because our duty is a debt owed to God for God's abounding grace ... an amazing grace that has saved us ... undeserving as we are!! Amen.