

The Tenuous Relationship between Duty and Desire

No one that is emotionally and psychologically whole wants a sexual relationship with their spouse based solely on *duty* rather than *desire*. And yet, 1Corinthians 7:3-4 describes and prescribes this part of the relationship as a “*duty*” of which we are not to *deprive one another, except by mutual agreement, and for a limited time, 1Corinthians 7:5*. (The Greek word is *opheile* {*of-i-lay*}, and is used in Matthew 18:32 and Romans 13:7 as a *debt* and that which *owed*, respectively). Instead of mere *obligation*, we want to be *desired* and *appreciated*, and to have this part of relationship be a loving and natural expression of such. Stop and think a moment: Does the *duty* that is *owed* in and through this aspect of the relationship diminish the need we have to be *desired*? Of course it doesn't. Now, if we can understand and appreciate this, then we ought to also be able to comprehend that although we have a *duty* of obedience to God, He prefers our service be motivated by a *desire* to please Him.

Such is the delicate and tenuous relationship between *duty* and *desire*. Do we think, or perhaps even worse, assume, that God appreciates our service to Him when it is based only on *duty*, without any real *desire* to please attached? Put in other words: Do we think God is pleased with our service to Him when it is given merely from a sense of *obligation* rather than motivated by *love*?

And yet despite these things, *duty* certainly has its place. Joseph, through God's providence, was put in a very responsible and powerful position within the house of the Egyptian, Potiphar. But Potiphar's wife repeatedly urged Joseph to *lie with her*. He consistently refused, but note carefully his stated reason(s), “*Behold, with me around, my master does not concern himself with anything in the house, and he has put all that he owns in my charge. There is no one greater in this house than I, and he has withheld nothing from me except you, because you are his wife. How then could I do this great evil and sin against God?*” Genesis 39:8-9. Joseph's words include both an *implied duty* to Potiphar, as well as a *stated duty* to God that kept him spiritually pure regardless of what he may have *desired* on a purely personal and physical level.

Thus, *duty* can be the right motivation- especially when our *desires* may not be what they ought to be. Which of us hasn't attended a mid-week bible study or a Sunday evening worship out of *duty* when, for any number of reasons, our *desire* was to stay home, or do something else. Though our *heart* may not have gotten us to the assembly, our *mind* said it was the right thing to do. I don't know about you, but on those occasions, something always seemed to be said or done that made me *glad* I went to “*the house of the Lord,*” cf. Psalm 122:1! *Duty* prevailed over *desire*, and I was blessed for my obedience. But more importantly, I think God was pleased with my obedience, even if it was motivated more by *duty* than *desire*.

But there is a “flipside.” Paul very much wanted the Corinthians to contribute to the *collection of funds for the poor saints in Jerusalem*, and even provided instructions on how they could do so, 1Corinthians 16:1-4. But, he did not want the Corinthians to be *obligated* or *compulsed* by *duty* to participate. Again, note carefully the inspired text, “*Let each one do just as he has purposed in his heart; not grudgingly or under compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver,*” 2Corinthians 9:7. Though he surely had the authority to *order* their compliance, he much preferred to *appeal* to them, hoping and trusting that their *desire* would lead them to the proper conclusion and activity (cp. Philemon 8-9). If the Corinthians were merely *obeying an order* from a sense of *duty*, they would not receive the benefit of participation themselves, as they would if prompted by *desire*, cf. 2Corinthians 9:8-11. Additionally, the implication of “*for God loves a cheerful giver*” is that, at least in this case, *desire* was preferred over *duty* by God.

Ultimately, we need both *duty* and *desire* to work together for us “*to be pleasing to Him,*” 2Corinthians 5:9. We need to rely on our understood *duty* when our heart’s *desire* may be in conflict with God’s will. And we need *desire* to prevent our service to Him from becoming mere obligatory ritual for us. Thus, this combination- or conflict, depending on which side you fall, of *head* (duty) and the *heart* (desire) is necessary to keep the *body* and its *soul* on the right path! Obviously, the absolute best and highest aim is to have our *heads* and *hearts* on the same page... so that our hearts *desire* what our heads understand our *duty* to be. Let’s work on getting them together, shall we? It will solve a lot of inner conflict for us by allowing us to enjoy doing the right things for the right reasons. But more importantly, it will make us pleasing to God in every **circumstance and situation**. (Philip C. Strong; Southport Church of Christ; 7202 Madison Ave, Indianapolis, IN 46227; online at southportcofc.org; email to mrpcstrong@hotmail.com)