

DUTY

Alumni Prize Essay

Read by Daniel MacIntyre at the Commencement
Exercises, May 27, 1930

To reflect, even briefly, upon the term duty, calls to mind such a multitude of suggestions with which that term is associated, that their number seems to border upon the infinite. Duty! At the word we are reminded of activities of every description; of wars, in which great numbers of individuals have engaged in herculean struggles with each other, because they were convinced that duty called them to do so; of the various commercial pursuits with which men are occupied; of art, of literature, and of a host of other professions and walks of life, in the pursuance of which duty is the actuating principle.

Before progressing further, let us consider what duty is. It is defined as that which a person is morally obliged to do or to refrain from doing in any given circumstance. We can thus see how wide is the application of the term. In its scope it embraces all mankind, and every deed which was ever done was, and is related, in a positive or negative manner, to the performance of duty. At no time was man free from the obligations of duty; even our first parents were subject to its dictates, a fact which is evidenced by their fall. Adam and Eve were placed in the garden of Eden, enjoying all happiness, in the favor of the Master, and assured of the continuance of that felicitous state, as long as they remained obedient to the single command which He placed on them, and, when they ate of the forbidden fruit, they failed in their duty towards God, with what results to their posterity is attested by all ages since that time. And so on, throughout the centuries there has been no cessation of the universal law that each and every human being has a duty to perform, and whether he performs it well or ill is dependent upon his sense of responsibility for his especial obligations.

The idea of duty is, in common acceptance, not an agreeable one, for duty is no respecter of persons, and we all must, at some time or other, perform tasks which are unpleasant and disagreeable, but which, because they

are part of our obligations, cannot or should not be shirked. For instance, when the late war, with its accompanying period of death and destruction, burst upon the world, thousands of our gallant Canadians, as well as countless numbers of the best manhood of other countries, went forth to fight and to die, if need be, for the homeland. Was not this a direct result of the influence of duty? The greater number of them were not forced to go. Nevertheless, realizing that they owed this duty to their kindred and their country, they voluntarily severed all home ties and marched forth to face the horrors of destructive war.

Again, the adherent to the path of duty often finds his way beset by the difficulties of restraint and coercion, calling for an even greater measure of self-control and resolution. To exemplify this phase of the question, we need only cast a retrospective glance upon our own lives, and we are reminded of the number of times the monitor of conscience has vetoed the commission of some act, which, to us, at that time, seemed the acme of all that was pleasant and desirable. As children, this constraint was not always made clearly manifest to us by any interior promptings, or by any consideration of the moral obligations entailed. But whatever laxity thus existed on our part was more than counteracted by the salutary effects of the authority of parents and superiors, whose care it was to guide us in the path of righteousness. We may not always have answered the call of duty. We may at times have stilled the voice of conscience and pursued the bent of our own passions and inclinations. It remains true, nevertheless, that we cannot escape the law of duty, and, however frequently we attempt to break away from or elude its exactions, that law remains, immutable, inexorable, as before. On this account duty is invariably regarded as a stern taskmaster, but one which is, if its dictates are closely followed, productive of both benefit and satisfaction.

In addition to its disciplinary effect upon the conduct of man, duty plays an equally important role, as a guide or director of his actions, and it is, perhaps, in this respect that its influence is the most beneficial. Man, endowed with a free will and intended for good and great things, is, nevertheless, on account of the primeval fall, inclined towards evil; hence there must be some agency,

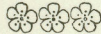
some guiding power to direct his energy into the proper channels; otherwise he would quickly become the slave of his passions. This guiding power is supplied by duty, (known chiefly through the law), inasmuch as it embraces all man's social and moral obligations, and thus regulates his conduct, so that it will be in conformity with what is required of a reasonable being and a Christian. Man's duty to God is one of the surest and most trustworthy guides which he can have in his passage through life, for that duty comprises his religion, without which his life would be vain and purposeless.

In the obligations which man owes to himself and to his fellowman, he has a powerful aid to moral rectitude, and a sure director in the path of righteousness. The virtues of justice, honesty and charity are direct results of adherence to such guidance, and a man, in the practice of these virtues, arms himself in proof against all the assaults of the world upon his integrity. The life of the late Marshal Foch demonstrates to us the fact, that the man who sets duty above all else and adopts it for his guide, is choosing the most certain road to success, in both the worldly and the spiritual sense.

While the performance of duty may, sometimes, be irksome or unpleasant, we should bear in mind the fact that it is not always so, and in such a case the ancient maxim that a man likes to do that which he does well is especially applicable. Certain duties there are which are always welcome, and in the discharge of which we invariably experience pleasure and satisfaction. But, on the other hand, we often have to perform tasks which are not to our taste, and therefore may be tedious and even disagreeable. It is in the commission of these last, however, that we receive the greatest amount of valuable training in will-power and self-restraint, and the acquisition of these virtues will make it possible for us to conceive a liking for those duties, which, previously, were distasteful. That the conscientious performance of duty can and does become a source of pleasure is, after all, only reasonable and natural. For, in so doing, the knowledge that our conduct is right and proper, produces, in our souls, a feeling of satisfaction or gratification, which is akin to pleasure, and from which emanates a sense of enjoyment, in the realization of a duty well performed. Thus we see, that far from being as arduous and unplea-

sant as, too often, in common acceptance it is held, the path of duty may, when followed diligently, become easy and pleasurable.

In considering a few of the numerous phases of duty, we have seen that as a taskmaster, duty may, perhaps, be regarded as somewhat stern and harsh, and that adherence to its principles may entail a measure of self-immolation, and the exercise of a due amount of will-power and self-control. We have also seen that a conscientious discharge of its obligations constitutes the most reliable guide to a successful termination of our efforts, whatever be their end. And finally, we see that from obedience to the laws of duty, we may derive both profit and enjoyment—ample remuneration for any inconvenience which may have been occasioned by them.



Faith is the pencil of the soul,
That pictures heavenly things.

—*Burbidge*

Covetousness, like a candle ill made, smothers the splendor of a happy fortune in its own grease.—*F. Osborn*

Earnestness is enthusiasm tempered by reason.

—*Pascal*

