

Moments before the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805 Admiral Nelson ordered Captain John Blackwood to send to the English fleet the message “England expect that every man will do his duty.” You’ll find those words inscribed at the base of Nelson’s Column in London’s Trafalgar Square. Like the words of our gospel, they’re an expression of faith and encouragement, as well as a command all in one and the same breath.

To ask anyone to do their duty in combat is perhaps the most difficult request a country can make of a citizen. Having been there myself, as many of us at St. Ann’s have, I can tell you first-hand that there are few more terrifying experiences in human life. But if you wish to live, you do your duty.

Jesus tells us that it’s the same way with the children of God. If we wish to live, we have the duty to follow the law of love in everything we do. And he reminds us that nobody is going to thank us for it – following the law of love is both our duty and our reward.

Most of our duty on a day-to-day basis probably doesn’t seem like combat at all, and much of it can appear to be downright ordinary. For instance, everyone in our families expects that everyone else in it will simply do his or her duty. It’s part of the way we all get along and in the process express our consent to living out God’s law of love.

But sometimes we can lose sight of that requirement just to do our duty. We can convince ourselves that somehow we’re entitled to something even though we’re just doing what we’re expected to do. Not only that – sometimes we can even think we know what that reward should look like, as if the amazing God who gave us life itself needed a recommendation from us about how to proceed.

There’s a story about little Tommy, who once decided that his mom and dad owed him big time for all the chores he had to do around the house. So he gave them a bill one day. It read like this:

What Mom and Dad Owe Tommy

For tidying my room \$2.00
For putting out the garbage: \$1.75
For putting my toys away: \$2.25
TOTAL: \$6.00, payable upon receipt

Now Tommy's parents were lovely and gentle people, not unlike you, and they knew exactly what the right thing to do was. So, when he woke up the next morning, little Tommy found an envelope on his nightstand. Inside were \$6.00 and a note.

Tommy was so thrilled to get the money that he counted it three times; each time dreaming of a different way he could spend it all. After a while though, he opened the note that had been in the envelope with the money. It was a bill from Mom and Dad. It read like this:

What Tommy Owes Mom and Dad:

For caring for Tommy when he was sick:	nothing
For cooking Tommy's dinner every night for the last seven years:	nothing
For all of Tommy's clothes:	nothing
For teaching Tommy how to field a grounder:	nothing

And it went on for a while like that. At the bottom was the total:

What Tommy owes Mom and Dad for doing their duty - nothing

There was a postscript, too, next to which Mom and Dad had drawn a cross:

What Mom and Dad and Tommy owe to Jesus for doing His duty – everything.

Little Tommy understood something just then. He ran and found his mom and dad at the breakfast table, and gave them both a big hug. Then he offered the six dollars back, but they just laughed and told him that six dollars was about the cost of a good lesson these days, and that he could keep the money. He had learned something important about love and duty that day they told him, and he could pay them back simply by doing his duty as best he could from then on in.

Thirteen years later little Tommy showed his parents what he'd learned, when he came back from Iraq in the way no parents should ever have to see their child return. His best friend, whose life he had saved, handed his parents an envelope. In it were six dollars and a note he'd written when he shipped out a few months earlier, instructing his friend to deliver it to his parents if something should happen to him. It read like this:

What Mom and Dad really owe Tommy

For doing my duty so that you and everyone I love can live in freedom and safety -	nothing
For carrying your love around with me all the time -	nothing
For the difficulty of doing the loving thing when everyone around me was doing what's wrong -	nothing

And the list went on for a while like that.

At the bottom was the total:

What Mom and Dad really owe Tommy for doing his duty – nothing.

There were two postscripts to Tommy's note. The first said:

What Tommy really owes to Mom and Dad – Thank you for the privilege of letting me be born, to be your child, for the love you gave me, and for everything you've done and been for me, without ever demanding anything in return.

The second postscript said:

What Mom and Dad and Tommy owe to Jesus for doing His duty – it's still everything. But I understand now what that really means and so do you, I think. Love,
Tommy.

The roots of duty, like the roots of love and faith run deep and are intertwined, for there can be no sense of duty without love and faith. Like the words on Nelson's Column, the words of our duty to love, and love deeply are inscribed on our hearts, encouraging us to fight the good fight. Living in a world in which the battle between good and evil has no boundaries, in a war that is far more complex than even the most terrifying physical combat, can we be surprised to hear that Jesus expects no less than for every one of us simply to do our duty.