

Passover, Obligation, and Love

by John W. Ritenbaugh

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Recently in Miami, Florida, a vacationing West Virginian pulled a few crumpled bills from his pocket to tip a valet parking attendant, mistakenly giving him one thousand dollars! Driving off, he was well on his way back to West Virginia before he discovered what he had done. He returned to Miami to find that the attendant, knowing the man had made a mistake, had given the money to his supervisor to hold in case the man returned to claim it.

The news report primarily focused its attention on the honest young man who returned the money, and well it should have. But what about the vacationer? Did he feel obligated to share some of his good fortune with the young man? Yes, he gave the attendant a much larger tip than normal, though it was a very small percentage of what he almost lost.

We live at a time when many have a very weak sense of obligation at best. The dominant idea seems to be, "I deserve it," or, "The world owes it to me." For example, many entertainers and professional athletes do not feel obligated to conclude their existing contracts. After a "big hit" or a "good year," they try to renegotiate a better contract before the old one expires.

Have the United States and Canada ever seen a time in their histories when people's sense of obligation to nation, community or family was at a lower ebb? Though these three institutions give us so much, it seems so easy for so many not to feel a sense of indebtedness to them. Many even lack recognition of our indebtedness. Obviously, human nature does not come naturally equipped with a sense of obligation. It is a quality—a character trait—that we must learn.

We come under obligation when a service is rendered to us, causing indebtedness. Very closely related to accountability and responsibility, obligation makes us feel required to follow through to repay the indebtedness. *True obligation is a deep conviction that we owe someone something.* This concept is integral to the seriousness of Passover and the Days of Unleavened Bread.

Redemption Creates Obligation

The word "obligation" or one of its forms does not appear in the King James translation of the Bible and only three times in the New King James Version. However, its sense appears scores of times through other words, such as "because," "therefore," "wherefore," "for" and "thus." These words precede a Christian requirement, an exhortation to obedience or a certain godly attitude.

For example I Peter 1:15-16 states, "But as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy.'" Because God our Father, whom we represent, is holy, we are under obligation to be holy. Peter draws upon our sense of obligation to the Father to exhort us to obedient conduct. He later intensifies the sense of obligation:

Knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot. He indeed was foreordained before the foundation of the world, but was manifest in these last times for *you*.(verses 18-20)

Though we can certainly understand that "you" refers generally to mankind, it has a greater impact if we see it aimed directly at the individual. That is, Christ would still have died if only *you* had sinned and needed redeeming.

One's sense of obligation is in direct proportion to his ability to contrast the peerless quality and pricelessness of the gift given as compared to the worthlessness of the purchased possession. A billionaire might consider a thousand dollars to be pocket change. To a person bankrupt and destitute, a thousand dollars is a fortune.

Luke 7:36-47 contains the story of the weeping woman who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and anointed them with a fragrant oil. In the parable Jesus expounds important understanding regarding obligation:

"There was a certain creditor who had two debtors. One owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty. And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?" Simon answered and said, "I suppose the one whom he forgave more."

And He said to him, "You have rightly judged." Then He turned to the woman and said to Simon, "Do you see this woman? I entered your house; you gave Me no water for My feet, but she has washed My feet with her tears and wiped them with the hair of her head. You gave Me no kiss, but this woman has not ceased to kiss My feet since the time I came in. You did not anoint My head with oil, but this woman has

anointed My feet with fragrant oil. Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little." (verses 41-47)

This woman perceived and appreciated a greatness in Jesus that motivated her to so abase herself as to weep, cleanse His feet with her tears, kiss and anoint them! Notice her emotion, courage, devotion (oblivious of public opinion) and humility (in performing the task of a slave). We can safely guess that Jesus had turned this woman from a life of sin. She may have been among the crowds who were convicted by His messages. When she heard He was nearby, she rushed to Simon's home, ignoring the scorn of others to express her gratitude to the One who had set her aright.

Her deed expressed her love and gratitude, springing from her recognition of or faith in His greatness as contrasted to her unworthiness. She felt obligated to respond in a way so memorable that God recorded it for all humanity for all time to witness. Note that the Bible shows human lips touching Jesus only twice: here and Judas' kiss of betrayal.

In contrast, Simon the Pharisee, evidently a man of some substance and ambition, was moved to invite the popular Jesus to his home. Self-concerned and inhospitable, he did not offer Jesus even the customary services a host normally provided visitors to his home.

From the context we can assume that he felt himself to be at least Jesus' equal. His conclusion that Jesus was no prophet probably suggests he felt superior to Him, that He was no more than an interesting celebrity. This biased self-evaluation in relation to Jesus produced in him no sense of obligation and thus no corresponding gratitude, humility or act of love—let alone common courtesies.

Had he a heart at all? The scene unfolding at his respectable table scandalized him, but God thought it so inspiring, He recorded it for our benefit. Simon judged, "She is a sinner." "No, Simon," Jesus replied, "she *was* a sinner." In this lies a major clue to the difference between the two people.

We Cannot Pay

Simon and the woman had something in common, according to the parable: both were debtors to the same creditor, and neither could meet His obligation. It is interesting to note in the model prayer of Matthew 6:9-13 that sin is expressed through the image of debt, a true metaphor. Duty neglected, a debt to God, must be

discharged by a penalty. All have sinned and the wages or penalty is death (Romans 3:23; 6:23). We are all under a peculiar form of indebtedness which we cannot pay and still have hope!

Simon and the woman each portray a class of sinner. Though we are all sinners, some have incurred more debt than others through the way they have lived. Some are outwardly respectable, decent and clean living, and others have fallen into gross, sensual and open transgression.

Simon was a great deal "better" than the coarse and unclean woman. She had been wallowing in filth, while he obtained respectability through his rigid morality and precise observance of civility. He had far less to answer for than she, but he had also received much more from his morality and righteousness. God is not unfair to bless people for the right things they have done. Nevertheless, *regardless of the size of the debt, neither could pay it.*

We all stand in the same relation to God as these two debtors. One's sins may be blacker and more numerous than another's, but when we consider degree of guilt and the complex motivations that go into those sins, perhaps we might not be so quick to pronounce the harlots and publicans' sins worse than the Pharisees'. Though their sins were clothed in "respectability," they still could not meet the debt.

"They had nothing with which to pay." That is precisely our position too! This means that no matter how much guilt we feel, no amount of tears, no amount of self-flagellation or self-discipline, no amount of change of life—no work we can do will lessen the debt. Some of these may be required by God and are good to do, but forgiveness, the payment of the debt, is by grace, by God's mercy through the blood of Jesus Christ! We cannot pay for it ourselves. If we could, then God would owe us something—He would be indebted to us (Romans 4:1-4)!

In his book *Major Barbara*, George Bernard Shaw, an agnostic at best, says through the character, Cusins, "Forgiveness is a beggar's refuge. . . . We must pay our debts." But Shaw does not say how. Though a man is honorable today, it does not change the fact that he was dishonorable yesterday. Often, historians try to write accounts that make their nation's actions and motives appear pure. But is it realistic to believe that history can be cleansed, virginity restored, murder undone, slander recalled or a lie purified? Can we just wipe our memories clean? We cannot return to the past to undo wrongs, let alone redeem ourselves for them.

Even if we mend our ways, it does not rectify the past. Though we may hate the evil, keeping us from doing it in the future, it does not affect our responsibility for what

is done! Our past stands cast in stone with a solemn death sentence written all over it. "For if the word spoken through angels proved steadfast, and every transgression and disobedience received a just reward [penalty]" (Hebrews 2:2).

We cannot pay. We stand before Him in penniless insolvency. Our hands and pockets are empty. But this is good because if we expect to be forgiven, we must recognize our insolvency.

If we decide to pay, we must pay it all; if He is going to forgive, we have to let Him forgive all. It must be one or the other, and we must choose which of the two it will be. If we choose the one, the payment is death without hope. If we choose the other, we fall under obligation to the One who pays our unpayable debt.

But to what are we indebted? Jesus Himself gives the answer as a question in Luke 7:42, "And when they had nothing with which to repay, he freely forgave them both. Tell Me, therefore, which of them will love him more?" Jesus draws direct correlations between acts of love and recognition of the enormity of the forgiven sins and their payment.

"Therefore I say to you, her sins, which are many, are forgiven, for she loved much. But to whom little is forgiven, the same loves little" (verse 47). One who knows he has been forgiven much feels more obliged to the payer of his debt than the one who thinks his indebtedness small. He feels obliged to live the way the payer of his debt tells him he should. Those most conscious of forgiveness will bear the most fruit in godly love.

Paul's Example

The depth and fervor of our Christianity depend more on the awareness of our guilt as contrasted with the expanse of God's forgiveness than upon anything else. Perhaps the finest example of that attitude is the apostle Paul.

He writes, "But by the grace of God I am what I am, and His grace toward me was not in vain; but I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God which was with me" (I Corinthians 15:10). Apparently without much consciousness of what others thought of him for doing so, he responded to God with great energy and enthusiasm.

Relating his own experience, Paul tells Timothy, "Although I was formerly a blasphemer, a persecutor, and an insolent man; but I obtained mercy because I did it ignorantly in unbelief. And the grace of our Lord was exceedingly abundant, with

faith and love which are in Christ Jesus. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners, of whom I am chief. However, for this reason I obtained mercy, that in me first Jesus Christ might show all longsuffering, as a pattern to those who are going to believe on Him to everlasting life" (I Timothy 1:13-16).

Probably the next to last epistle Paul wrote, I Timothy shows that very late in his life, the apostle was still very much aware of the enormity of what he had been forgiven. He was not carrying a burdensome load of guilt but a realistic recognition of his indebtedness to Christ for all that he was and all he had accomplished.

He also says in Philippians 3:6, "Concerning zeal, persecuting the church; concerning the righteousness which is in the law, blameless." Is there a contradiction between these two assessments? No, because before conversion, Paul was a great deal like Simon the Pharisee.

Though a respected and zealous Pharisee, Paul knew he was guilty of many of the deeds and attitudes Jesus denounced the Pharisees for in Matthew 23. In Romans 7 he saw himself struggling with sin within but rescued from it through Jesus Christ. His faith was in God's grace, and he lived and worked for God out of a deep sense of grateful obligation.

He was full of wonder and gratitude when he thought of what Christ had done for him. G. K. Chesterton writes, "It is the highest and holiest of the paradoxes that the man who really knows he cannot pay his debt will be forever paying it."

Paul supplies us with more definitive answers as to what we are obligated. Summarizing in Romans 12:1, he writes, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God. . . ." To paraphrase, he says, "In light of all I have just told you, this is what you are obligated to do." Chapter 12 primarily concerns relationships within the body and to a lesser extent to those outside. Chapter 13 begins by stating our obligation to submit to civil governments, respect those in authority and pay taxes.

Another summary statement captures the breadth of our obligations. "Owe no one anything except to love one another, for he who loves another has fulfilled the law. For the commandments, 'You shall not commit adultery,' 'You shall not murder,' 'You shall not steal,' 'You shall not bear false witness,' 'You shall not covet,' and if there is any other commandment, are all summed up in this saying, namely, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' Love does no harm to a neighbor; therefore love is the fulfillment of the law" (Romans 13:8-10).

Paul presents us with an interesting paradox. On the one hand, he says that we should owe no man anything that he can rightfully claim from us. But on the other hand, we must owe everyone more than we can hope to pay, that is, perfect love.

He extends and intensifies the concept of obligation. We must be more scrupulous within the limits of the common idea of indebtedness, and also infinitely widen the range within which it operates. Did not our failure to meet our obligations to God and man accrue for us an unpayable debt? Now that the debt has been paid, we are obliged not only to strive to avoid further indebtedness, but also to expand and perfect the giving of love.

This paradox is more apparent than real, because love is not an added duty but the inclusive *framework* within which all duties should be done. Love is the motivating power that frees and enables us to serve and sacrifice with largeness of heart and generosity of spirit.

If we view love as just the keeping of God's laws, we are stuck on a low-level, letter-of-the-law approach to righteousness. Do not misunderstand, keeping God's law is a necessary aspect of love, but love is far more complex. Commandment keeping is compulsory and can be done in an "only because" attitude, one that concludes, "I must love the person, but I don't have to like him." Drawing upon Christ's teaching, Paul gives an entirely new significance to the idea of obligation.

Expressing Our Gratitude

When the fallen woman washed Christ's feet with her tears, wiped them with her hair, kissed them with her lips and anointed them with oil, was her love merely to keep a commandment or an exquisite expression of a heart freed to give its all?

I Corinthians 11:17-34 contains the tragic story of gluttony, drunkenness, class distinction and party spirit that infested the "love feasts" of a Christian congregation. Why were they guilty of these sins? They did not love their brethren! To what did Paul refer to correct their abominable behavior? He reminded them of the Passover service and Christ's death!

Christ's death is the supreme example of unselfish sacrificial service and love. "For God so loved the world that He gave . . ." (John 3:16). They did not make this sacrifice because they were commanded; the Father and Son freely and generously gave of themselves in their beneficent goodwill for our well-being.

This beneficent goodwill begins when we can finally make a true evaluation of ourselves in relation to God. When we can properly judge ourselves as we are against what was freely paid—sacrificed—for our forgiveness and eventual eternal life, then we can truly begin to partake of God's favor.

Job cries out to God, "I have heard of You by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees You. Therefore I abhor myself, and repent in dust and ashes" (Job 42:5-6). Though among the most upright of men, all his life Job had held a wrong evaluation of himself in relation to God and other men. But when God allowed him to "see" himself, he was devastated, his vanity was crushed and he repented. Only then could he really begin to love.

Concerning the bread and wine, Christ instructs us, "Do this in remembrance of Me" (I Corinthians 11:24-25). This command could also be translated, "Do this for the remembering of me," or "Do this in case you forget." God does not want us to let His Son's sacrifice get very far from our minds. He does not want us to get maudlin over it, but to remember that it represents the measure of His love and our worth to Him. Remembering helps us retain a right sense of obligation. He does not wish that our obligation become a burden, but fill us with a wonder, an awe, that He would pay so much for something so utterly defiled.

We are admonished to remember not only Christ's personality, but also His connection to the Old Testament Passover, His violent death for the remission of mankind's sins, His sacrifice's connection to the New Covenant and that He is our sinless Creator! His selfless act becomes the foundation of all loving relationships. It gives us reason to hope that our lives are not spent in vain and motivates us to do what we failed to do—what put us in debt—love.

Our Fellowship Is With *Him*

Paul continues, "For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body" (verse 29). To eat or drink in an unworthy manner is to treat His sacrifice with irreverence, disrespect or without due appreciation, as shown by the conduct of our lives. To do so means one is not showing much love in his life because, since he has not seen his sins and brought them before God for forgiveness, he has not been forgiven much. Because he is still wrapped up in himself and his sins, he is not truly free to love others.

In taking the Passover this year, let us strive to remember that *our fellowship at that special time is with Him*. Our brethren with us at the service are only incidental to our relationship with Christ on this occasion. He is the focus.

The Passover service is not primarily an hour of instruction, although we undoubtedly learn from it. Passover is a communion, an act of fellowship with Christ, within the framework of a ritual. If we are in the right spirit of devotion, we are then in the closest relationship with our Savior.

Not only is He the host of our feast, but symbolically, He is also the feast itself. "Then Jesus said to them, 'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink His blood, you have no life in you. Whoever eats My flesh and drinks My blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For My flesh is food indeed, and My blood is drink indeed. He who eats My flesh and drinks My blood abides in Me, and I in him. As the living Father sent Me, and I live because of the Father, so he who feeds on Me will live because of Me'" (John 6:53-57).

Brethren, what a sacrifice, what an example, what a purchase price to be obligated to! Nothing better could ever happen to us in our life!

God intends Passover to teach us these things so that each year begins with getting turned about where we have deviated and "jump started" in the right attitude and direction.

As this Passover season approaches, let us cry out to God for a better understanding of what we are and what Christ was, did and is so we may be filled with an awesome sense of our indebtedness.

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PO Box 471846
Charlotte, NC 28247-1846