

Is Duty a 4-Letter Word?

***“The husband must fulfill his duty to his wife,
and likewise also the wife to her husband”***

[1 Corinthians 7:3](#)

To us (who long for joy) fulfilling a duty sounds more onerous than joyful. If we try to find a way to make the word “duty” seem more palatable we’re out of luck – the Greek dictionary offers even less attractive synonyms like “debt” and “obligation.” What burdensome sounding words – particularly since this verse comes in the middle of a bedroom passage. Paul is writing about sex.

Paul is not (as many translations imply that God is just making a suggestion: (“let the husband ... let the wife”) or that He’s simply implying that sexual generosity is merely a good idea: It is. But God uses stronger words. This is a command: (“the “husband must ... the wife must.” The original Greek makes that clear. The parallel wording also makes clear that both husband and wife are to *fulfill* this duty. Fulfill; not half-halfheartedly but generously.

Generosity sounds good, particularly if we’re the recipient. It sounds somewhat less appealing when we hear that we’re the ones to be generous. But when God says sexual generosity is a *duty* we must fulfill, the charm of generosity quickly fades. A duty? Is that how God sees sex – as a duty? How disappointing. Or is it? It all depends on what we think about duty... and on whether we think giving to another will make us lose out.

Duty Sounds Like a 4-Letter Word

We have such a strong knee-jerk reaction to the word “duty, that we tend to flinch when we read it. Let’s read this passage more carefully. I’ll walk you through it more slowly:

Duty is a debt owed to *another*. But to whom is this particular debt owed? We assume it’s to the spouse, but the original word order suggests differently. Literally, the passage reads: *To his wife the husband must pay back his debt and likewise also the wife to her husband*. By putting the phrase “to his wife” at the very beginning of the sentence, Paul emphasizes to whom the *payment* goes. While the payment goes to the wife. The debt is not to her but to God. The same is true for the wife. *payment* goes to her husband, but her *debt* is to God. This is exactly what’s going on in [Matthew 10:8](#) – *Freely you received* [from God]; *freely give* [to each other]. God doesn’t ask us to pay Him back; He asks us to pay to other people what we owe to Him.

In the bedroom, we fulfill our duty to God when we fulfill our spouse. Neither husband nor wife is to act the miser; both are to be generous lovers. I love the reciprocity of this passage and the explicit mention that husbands must gift their wives. Paul is carefully and specifically caring for women. When I talk with couples, every husband I’ve asked has said that his wife’s response to his touch is even more arousing than her direct caress of him. What a call to a wife who wants to deeply gift her husband!

God says to give to OTHERS what we owe to HIM.

Giving Isn't as Risky as It Seems

God's command to be generous doesn't put us at risk. He knows things about giving that we often miss:

- He knows that giving won't lessen our supply.
- He knows that He will fill the empty places in our life.
- He knows that giving – freely giving – brings joy.

When Duty Meets Joy

When God commands husbands to sexually gift their wives and commands wives to sexually gift their husbands, He's interested in more than settling a debt – He's interested in our joy. God is commanding us to act in ways that bring us deep happiness.

Jesus knows it is better to give than to receive. He's certain of it, not just as “head knowledge” but also from personal experience. Gifting others didn't lessen His supply. God filled in the empty places in His life. And Jesus found out first-hand that giving is followed by joy. He wants us to share His certainty that God will give us the same experience.

Sexual generosity, by the way, is just part of the picture. God doesn't limit His command to what we do in the bedroom (or in the living room if the kids have moved out). God's commands generosity in all aspects of life – not just with material things like possessions or money or physical acts, but with more personal things like time, kindness, grace, forgiveness, and love. He wants all our lives to exhibit such bounty.

Duty is not your typical 4-letter word. Duty is an *awesome* 4-letter word. Paying this debt gives us back far more than we give out. In [Luke 6:38](#), God promises just that experience.