

Duty, Honor, Country

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May 12, 1962 was a normal day for me, except that I was especially happy that it was my sixteenth birthday. Little did I know that a historic event was taking place across the country. That morning General Douglas MacArthur left his hotel to go to the U.S. Military Academy at West Point to accept the Sylvanus Thayer Medal, the highest honor that can be awarded by the Military Academy. Before the gathered Corps of Cadets and military dignitaries who came for the event General MacArthur gave one of the most eloquent and inspiring speeches ever uttered in the annals of military history.

As a teenager I had only a vague knowledge of General MacArthur, but I have since learned that he was one of the greatest generals who ever served America, perhaps one of the greatest in history.¹ His service to his country spanned the years from 1903, when he graduated from the Military Academy, to April 5, 1964, when he died in Washington, D.C., at the age of 84. He was recognized early in his career as a brilliant officer and at the outset of World War I was quickly promoted to brigadier general. It is a little known fact that General MacArthur became the most decorated American soldier of the war. Twelve years later he was named Chief of Staff of the Army, and in 1937 he retired. Recalled to active duty during World War II, he was assigned as commander of the Southwest Pacific Theater during the greater part of the war. His wartime triumphs were followed by service as Supreme Commander of the Allied occupation forces in Japan. When the Korean conflict erupted in 1950, he also commanded the United Nations forces in Korea which turned back the Communist invasion. He completed his active military service in 1951.

Essential Values

On that special morning in May General MacArthur took as his theme three important values mentioned in the mission statement of the U.S. Military Academy —

“Duty, honor, country: Those three hallowed words reverently dictate what you ought to be, what you can be, what you will be. They are your rallying point to build courage when

courage seems to fail, to regain faith when there seems to be little cause for faith, to create hope when hope becomes forlorn.

“The unbelievers will say they are but words, but a slogan, but a flamboyant phrase. Every pedant, every demagogue, every cynic, every hypocrite, every troublemaker, and, I am sorry to say, some others of an entirely different character, will try to downgrade them even to the extent of mockery and ridicule.²

“But these are some of the things they do. They build your basic character. They mold you for your future roles as the custodians of the Nation's defense. They make you strong enough to know when you are weak, and brave enough to face yourself when you are afraid.

“They teach you to be proud and unbending in honest failure, but humble and gentle in success; not to substitute words for actions, not to seek the path of comfort, but to face the stress and spur of difficulty and challenge; to learn to stand up in the storm, but to have compassion on those who fall; to master yourself before you seek to master others; to have a heart that is clean, a goal that is high; to learn to laugh, yet never forget how to weep; to reach into the future, yet never neglect the past; to be serious, yet never to take yourself too seriously; to be modest so that you will remember the simplicity of true greatness, the open mind of true wisdom, the meekness of true strength.

“They give you a temperate will, a quality of the imagination, a vigor of the emotions, a freshness of the deep springs of life, a temperamental predominance of courage over timidity, of an appetite for adventure over love of ease.

“The code which those words perpetuate embraces the highest moral law and will stand the test of any ethics or philosophies ever promulgated for the things that are right

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and its restraints are from the things that are wrong.”³

The three values of duty, honor and country are vitally important to the cohesiveness and performance of the U.S. military, but they also have a special meaning and application in Christian doctrine and practice.

The Value of Duty

In some quarters of modern Christian culture, duty has become a dirty word just as General MacArthur said. For many a noble virtue has been redefined as legalism, which must be avoided or even scorned. Yet, Jesus and His apostles imposed many requirements on disciples based on the premise that they had the authority or the right to tell others what to do. In the biblical sense duty is having a concern for the authority and will of God.

First, for the Christian, duty is directed to God. Solomon said, “Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man” (Ecclesiastes 12:13 KJV). Notice Solomon said the “whole duty.” Most Christians, if asked for their priorities of devotion, would put God first and probably family second. Then, job, church, community and other interests would receive varying votes based on individual values. However, segmenting duty into merely a list of priorities can easily lead to compartmentalizing life. God has His part, family has its part, etc. On the contrary Jesus expressed the view that a disciple’s commitment to God must be so total and complete as to make love for family seem like hatred by comparison (Luke 14:26). Yet, giving one’s whole duty to God does not deprive family, church or community of love and service. Indeed, it is in doing one’s duty to God that produces true sacrificial love for spouse, family, neighbor and even enemy.

Second, duty recognizes an absolute authority who issues commandments to be followed. When the Roman centurion asked Jesus to heal his servant he did so on the basis of authority. Listen to his words and the response of Jesus, “The centurion replied, “Lord, I do not deserve to have you come under my roof. But just say the word, and my servant will be healed. For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, ‘Go,’ and he goes; and that one, ‘Come,’ and he comes. I say to my servant, ‘Do this,’ and he does

it.” When Jesus heard this, he was astonished and said to those following him, “I tell you the truth, I have not found anyone in Israel with such great faith” (Matthew 8:8-10 NIV).

The simplicity of the principle of duty based on authority is found in Peter’s words on the boat when Jesus ordered him to cast his net after fishing efforts had proven fruitless: “but because you say so I will let down the nets” (Luke 5:5 NIV). How many Christians today would say the same thing – “because You say so.” Jesus emphasized a number of times that He expects nothing less than absolute loyalty and obedience from His disciples. On His last night in the upper room Jesus said “You are My friends if you do what I command you” (John 15:14 NASB) and “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15 NASB). After a lifetime of serving Christ John could say “His commandments are not burdensome” (1 John 5:3 NASB).

However, in the period of the Judges in the Old Testament the chief characteristic of the time was that “everyone did what was right in his own eyes” (Judges 21:25 NASB). God’s Law ceased to have controlling authority over their lives. Much the same situation exists today both in society and even in the Church. Many Christians reject the authority of the Old Testament outright and subjectively pick and choose what they want to obey in the New Testament.

Mark Twain, the famous author of the stories of Tom Sawyer and Huckleberry Finn, tells the story of an industrial baron who once said to him, “Before I die I intend to make a pilgrimage to the Holy Land. I want to climb to the top of Mount Sinai where Moses stood and read the ten commandments aloud.” Twain merely retorted, “Why don’t you just stay home and keep them?”⁴ The theme of a classic book has become a popular slogan and imprinted on many commercial products, “WWJD” or “What would Jesus do?” Perhaps the sentimental idealism of WWJD needs to be changed to the biblical realism of “What would Jesus have me do?”

Third, duty reflects a right fear of the Lord. Many attempt to water down the meaning of this powerful biblical concept. Solomon says in Proverbs 8:13 that the fear of the Lord is to hate evil, that is, to have the same attitude toward evil that God has. That’s a good definition. But, how does hating evil

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express a fear of the Lord? It does so in two ways: first, considering God's hatred of sin I don't want to offend His holiness and force Him to judge me with wrath, and, second, considering His love for lost and dying people I don't want to disappoint and grieve God after He has done so much to save me.

In the end the biblical virtue of duty is fueled by a deep and passionate commitment to God. True biblical duty never comes from legalism, but flows from a faithful loyalty that will endure all suffering for the sake of Christ and will seek to "please Him in every way" (Colossians 1:10 NIV). In the history of America's wars soldiers, sailors, marines and airmen have put their lives on the line because they believed that America was worthy of their sacrifice. Christians should have that same attitude about duty to God. He is worth giving it all and holding nothing back.

The Value of Honor

Typically the word "honor" is used to mean the tribute shown to someone because of special merit and is expressed by giving an award or other public recognition. However, as a value honor means something very different. As early as the Middle Ages honor began to be thought of in terms of a code of integrity, dignity, and pride held by men of noble birth or knights who served the King. In similar fashion honor meant a woman's chastity or a reputation for moral purity. As a biblical value honor reflects a concern for the name of God.

First, honor is a sacred trust to respect God's name. God commanded the Israelites, "You shall not take the name of the LORD your God in vain" (Exodus 20:7 NASB). The Hebrew word translated "take" means to lift or carry.⁵ In other words, you will not lift up God's name in praise on the Sabbath or the Lord's Day and then live the rest of the week contrary to that praise and the holy standards of the covenant. It was honor for God's name that compelled Paul to remain faithful to the heavenly commission (Acts 26:19) and say "Woe to me if I preach not the gospel" (1 Cor. 9:16 NIV).

Second, honor means having a good name or reputation. Solomon said, "A good name is more desirable than great riches; to be esteemed is better than silver or gold" (Proverbs 22:1). There is no other way to develop a good reputation than by adherence to a consistent ethical and moral standard

as set forth in the Ten Commandments. In order to instill honor in future officers West Point adopted a simple code of conduct, which has been emulated by all military service schools and even private civilian schools: "I will not lie, cheat or steal, or tolerate those who do." John Wooden, one of the most successful basketball coaches who ever lived taught his players a simple ethic "Discipline yourself, and others won't need to, so never lie, never cheat, never steal."⁶

Third, honor is a commitment to integrity. Time was when a handshake sealed a contract and "a man's word was his bond." When General Douglas MacArthur was forced to leave the Philippines in early World War II because of the Japanese invasion, he promised to return. He did not say, "the American army will return." He said, "I shall return." Throughout the war American supplies that were smuggled to Filipino guerrillas bore the written message "I shall return." That simple message brought great encouragement during those difficult days and MacArthur kept his promise.⁷ Many in the media and government felt he should have said, "We shall return," but the Philippine people knew him and they knew they could trust his word. They knew that when he said something they could count on it.

The military is a values-based organization and as such insists that it is a soldier's duty and responsibility to hold himself or herself and fellow service members to a higher standard than what is expected or demanded by the society at large. If that is true of a secular organization, how much more should it be true of those in the Body of Christ? Jesus clearly expected His disciples to live by a righteous standard and gave them the requirement to confront bad behavior of fellow believers, first privately, then with witnesses, if necessary, and finally before the congregation as a last resort (Matthew 18:15-17; cf. Titus 3:10).

The Value of Devotion to Country

Americans love their country and one may appreciate its freedoms and advantages even more by traveling in other parts of the world. Moreover, those who have served in war sacrificed dearly on the world's battlefields because of valuing country, loved ones and comrades, not merely because the President or Generals ordered them into harms way.

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In the Christian faith devotion to country manifests similar, but more significant characteristics.

First, in Scripture the concept of “country” refers to the origin, the present home and the destination of God’s people. Paul said, “But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother” (Galatians 4:26 NIV). All the plans for the creation of man and the covenant of salvation originated in heaven. The writer to the Hebrews similarly reminded the early church that heaven is the believer’s destination,

“All these people were still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance. And they admitted that they were aliens and strangers on earth. People who say such things show that they are looking for a country of their own. If they had been thinking of the country they had left, they would have had opportunity to return. Instead, they were longing for a better country – a heavenly one. Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.” (Hebrews 11:14-16 NIV).

Second, being born in a country results in citizenship. Citizenship grants unique rights, privileges and obligations. Paul declared that for those born again in Jesus, “Our citizenship is in heaven, from which also we eagerly wait for a Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ” (Philippians 3:20 NIV). Perhaps Christians need to be reminded that the Savior is not going to come from Washington, D.C., but from the throne of God. The writer to the Hebrews reminds us of those blessed benefits and privileges this way,

“But you have come to Mount Zion, to the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of the living God. You have come to thousands upon thousands of angels in joyful assembly, to the church of the firstborn, whose names are written in heaven. You have come to God, the judge of all men, to the spirits of righteous men made perfect, to Jesus the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel” (Hebrews 12:22-24 NIV). And in the next chapter adds, “For here we do not have an enduring city, but we

are looking for the city that is to come” (Hebrews 13:14 NIV).

Third, allegiance is owed to one’s country. The founding fathers of the United States pledged their lives, their fortunes and their sacred honor, and all their capital was spent in birthing this great nation. However, our Father and Lord are in heaven and thus the Christian’s loyalty and allegiance are offered there first of all. Jesus taught His disciples to pray, “Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10 NIV). Many worthy movements and causes vie for man’s attention and commitment. Yet, concern for the reign of God and His Son who sacrificed His life for all mankind becomes the life focus for the believer. Paul spoke of this passion and loyalty when he wrote Timothy, “No one serving as a soldier gets involved in civilian affairs – he wants to please his commanding officer” (2 Timothy 2:4 NIV).

The hunger of God’s people is to see the fulfillment of the Kingdom of God, first to be received by every heart through the proclamation of the gospel and then to be celebrated when Jesus Christ returns in glory and establishes His reign on the earth. God’s will is that all would know Him and faithful disciples will devote their time, talent and treasure to the fullest extent to reach this goal.

As a religious person General MacArthur was a devout believer in God and a life-long Episcopalian. Not commonly known is that while avoiding public church services he faithfully led his family in evening devotions using the Book of Common Prayer.⁸ General MacArthur had a keen sense of his place in history and, considering his leadership in winning the war in the Pacific and his policies in governing Japan after World War II, he may have felt justified in regarding himself as one of the two preservers of the Christian faith, the other being the Pope.⁹ The truth is that if the Allies had lost World War II, the Church may have entered a new Dark Ages. Hitler had Antichrist tendencies with dreams of ruling the Western world, which led him to impose worship of himself on the churches and to seek the annihilation of Jews. The Japanese were devoted to Emperor worship and did everything they could to expunge Christianity from every country they invaded. In fact, the Christian faith is thriving in Japan today due to General MacArthur.

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As an example, shortly after his appointment as Supreme Commander for the Allied Powers in Japan the Secretary of the Treasury presented MacArthur with a governing plan that would have continued to punish the Japanese for their wartime actions. MacArthur firmly rejected this approach. He surprised his generals by refusing to send the American army to disarm Japanese soldiers but instead asked them to voluntarily surrender their arms. The Japanese respected MacArthur for his consideration and overwhelmingly complied, preventing much bloodshed and further animosity.

MacArthur particularly startled everyone by this public statement to the media, "If the historian of the future should deem my service worthy of some slight reference, it would be my hope that he mention me not as a commander engaged in campaigns and battles, even though victorious to American arms, but rather as one whose sacred duty it became, once the guns were silenced, to carry to the land of our vanquished foe the solace and hope and faith of Christian morals.¹⁰ He also said, "The more missionaries we can bring out here and the more occupation troops we can send home, the better," and, on his recommendation ten million Bibles were imported into Japan.¹¹ Not every Christian may have

the position or prestige to make such a dramatic impact on a culture as General MacArthur. Yet, every Christian has an opportunity to reflect the name of God to friends, neighbors and coworkers, and, in so doing, affect the advancement of God's kingdom.

Conclusion

Duty, honor, country. To the founding fathers of America these values represented all the ideals of citizenship. To the American soldier, marine, airman and sailor they represent the character of public service to defend the Constitution and national security even at the cost of personal sacrifice. To the Christian these words represent something far higher, nobler and grander. These are the values of Jesus who suffered and died for every person. Jesus listened to His Father's voice, He honored His Father's name, He obeyed His Father's will and in so doing brought the Kingdom of God. Those who profess to be disciples of Jesus can do no less.

¹For a definitive biography of General MacArthur I recommend William Manchester, *American Caesar*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1978.

²Little did General MacArthur know that he was a prophet and his words came to pass with the moral revolution (or devolution) of the 1960s and 1970s.

³The text of this speech is reproduced from Department of Defense Pamphlet GEN-1A, US Government Printing Office, 1964. Internet: <http://www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/au-24/au24-352mac.htm>.

⁴Brian Cavanaugh, T.O.R., The Sower's Seeds, Internet: <http://www.inspirationalstories.com/1/181.html>.

⁵New American Standard Bible Exhaustive Concordance, n. 5375, p. 1438.

⁶See Internet: <http://www.inspire21.com/site/stories/Wooden.html>.

⁷William Manchester, *American Caesar*, (Little, Brown & Co., 1978), p. 271.

⁸*Ibid.*, p. 517.

⁹*Ibid.*, p. 3

¹⁰*Ibid.*, p. 486

¹¹*Ibid.*, p. 511.