Duty! It is a powerful word and one of the most important in the whole lexicon of human language. The performance of one’s duty is essential to the flourishing of any society. If everyone pursues their own individual desires while neglecting their true and proper duties then society grows degenerate and deteriorates over time. Whether that society is the family, the city, the state, or the nation, no society can long endure if its members fail to do their duty. That’s why the Naval Academy endeavors to develop midshipmen morally, imbuing them with, among other things, the highest ideals of duty, for duty is an essential human virtue and all the more so for those sworn to protect society at large. But what exactly is it? How is it defined?

Perhaps Vice Admiral James B. Stockdale did better than anyone in demonstrating and explaining the meaning of duty. As you may recall, Admiral Stockdale was shot down over North Vietnam on September 9th, 1965, and spent more than seven years as a prisoner of the North Vietnamese. During his imprisonment he was consigned to solitary confinement for a total of 4 years, shackled with leg irons for 2, and tortured on 15 separate occasions. Nevertheless, despite being subjected to this massive maltreatment, he remained true to our country and led his fellow captives in resisting their North Vietnamese captors. In 1973, Admiral Stockdale was released from captivity and subsequently awarded the Medal of Honor by President Gerald Ford in recognition of his conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity above and beyond the call of duty. Yes, if anyone knew the meaning of duty, it was Admiral James Bond Stockdale.

In 1979, just six years after his release and repatriation, Admiral Stockdale delivered an address to the West Point Class of 1983. In that address, Stockdale referred to Lord Horatio Nelson’s signal before the Battle of Trafalgar, that great naval battle that forever doomed Napoleon’s desire to dominate the whole of Europe. And what did Nelson signal to the other vessels in his fleet? He signaled the following simple message: “England expects that every man will do his duty.”

Commenting on Nelson’s signal, Admiral Stockdale said, “That signal is a short but complete lesson in the fundamental and necessary concept of duty…Take note of the important word ‘expects’ in Nelson’s signal. The idea of expectation is very much a part of the concept of duty. The old Greeks understood this notion of expectation…To the Greeks a good man was a man who did what was expected of him depending on his particular station in the world…Men and women are called on in life to play a part. The part may be a big one or a small one, but once the part is given to us on life’s stage, it is expected of us to play it well.”

Admiral Stockdale then quoted the great stoic philosopher Epictetus who said, “Remember that you are an actor in a drama of such sort as the Author chooses – if short, then in a short one; if long, then in a long one. If it be his pleasure that you
should enact a poor man, or a cripple, or a ruler, or a private citizen, see that you act it well. For this is your business – to act well the given part, but to choose it belongs to another.”

Duty, according to Stockdale, is doing what is expected of us. Members of the Class of 2018, during your time at the Naval Academy you will be taught what is expected of you as a member of the profession of arms; more precisely, as a member of the naval profession. But duty is not limited to those of us in the military. As Stockdale rightly observed, duty applies to all of us for all of us are called to do what is expected of us in whatever role or station we occupy in life. As Stockdale put it, “A good cobbler (is) one who (is) expected to produce well-made shoes.” So the concept of duty applies to all of us to include those of you who are not in the military.

Yes, according to Stockdale, duty is doing what is expected of us. It is playing well the part that has been assigned to us by another. Quoting Epictetus, Stockdale said, “Remember that you are an actor in a drama of such sort as the Author chooses...For this is your business – to act well the given part.” Notice that Epictetus points to an “Author” who assigns us our duties. For we Christians, the Author is none other than God, and more specifically, the God who reveals himself in Jesus Christ. After all, in Acts 3:15 Jesus is called the “Author of Life.” You see, Jesus is the one who assigns us our part. And so it is important that we do what the Author expects of us, and that we seek to meet his expectation above all else.

So what does the Author expect from us? King Solomon gives an excellent answer in the book of Ecclesiastes. As you may know, Solomon was famous for his wisdom. 1 Kings 4:29-31 says, “God gave Solomon very great wisdom, discernment, and breadth of understanding as vast as the sand on the seashore, so that Solomon’s wisdom surpassed the wisdom of all the people of the east, and all the wisdom of Egypt. He was wiser than anyone else...” Toward the end of his life, this wise man wrote the book of Ecclesiastes describing what he had learned about the meaning of life. And in the 12th and final chapter he penned a summary describing what the Author of Life expects from us all.

So what does this wise man tell us about God’s expectation of us? According to Solomon, what duty or duties do we owe to God? In Ecclesiastes 12, Solomon lists three. In Ecclesiastes 12:1 he says, “Remember your creator in the days of your youth.” And in Ecclesiastes 12:13 he says, “Fear God and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone.”

So then, our first duty is to remember our Creator in the days of our youth. We need to remember that we have been created by God and are accountable to him. Unfortunately, we live in an age when more and more people are forgetting their Creator. This is particularly true among the young. Young people go off to college and forget their Creator on the college campus. Raised in church, they abandon church
while in college because they are either too busy for God or they want to indulge in passions and practices that were previously forbidden by their god fearing parents.

Yes, many young men and women forget their Creator in the days of their youth. But our first duty is to remember him! Members of the class of 2018, and midshipmen one and all, I urge you to remember your Creator in the days of your youth! If you forget God now, you may just forget him forever. There’s no guarantee you’ll return to him in the future if you turn from him today. Many a young man or woman says in their heart, “I’ll sow my wild oats while I am young and return to God when I am older.” Sadly, many never live long enough to return to God. Many others live long enough but never return to him. Their hearts grow hard and cold with time and they never come back to the God who made them.

No, there’s no guarantee you’ll remember God in the future if you forget your God today. And if you forget him in this world then he may forget you in the world to come. You may well find yourself standing in the Judgment among those who hear Jesus say, “Depart from me you workers of iniquity. I never knew you.” (See Mt. 7:23) My friend, those are words you don’t want to hear. So remember your Creator in the days of your youth!

Now let me say a word to those of you who are no longer in the prime of life. I say to you that it’s never too late to remember your Creator. Yes, it would have been best had you remembered him when you were young, but rest assured, he’ll accept you now when you are old. I had the privilege of leading my father to faith in his 85th year, just days before he died. I’m sure he must have regretted all those wasted years – years that could have been given to God. Be that as it may, at 85 he put his faith in Jesus Christ and found a home in Jesus’ arms. So if you’ve forgotten your Creator, if you’re neglecting him, if you’re passing from the prime of life into old age without a solid faith in him and a strong connection to him, then I say to you, “Remember your Creator...before the days of trouble come...before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened (in death)...and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the breath returns to God who gave it.” (Eccl. 12:1-2, 7)

Yes, this is your first duty to God: Remember your Creator. And this duty gives rise to the next two: Fear God and keep his commandments. Notice Ecclesiastes 12:13. Solomon says, “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone.”

So you see our second spiritual duty is to fear God. But what does that mean? Are we to be afraid of God as though God were a cosmic tyrant eager to harm us? Are we to cringe in fear before him as a slave or servant cringes before a cruel master? Hardly! Here’s how the Virgin Mary used the term. When she went to tell her cousin Elizabeth that she was pregnant with the Son of God, she sang a little song and said: “My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour. For he hath
regarded the low estate of his handmaiden: for, behold, from henceforth all generations shall call me blessed. For he that is mighty hath done to me great things; and holy is his name. And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation.” (Lk. 1:46-50 KJV)

“And his mercy is on them that fear him from generation to generation.” Does that sound like the song of one who was cringing in terror before a cosmic tyrant? No! For Mary, and for us, fearing God includes holding him in highest reverence and affording him the deepest of respect. It includes loving him with a love so deep and broad that if you fear anything, you fear only disappointing him as a child fears disappointing a loving father.

My friend, do you fear God like that? Do you hold him in highest reverence? Do you afford him the deepest respect? Do you love him with a love so deep and broad that if you fear anything, you fear only disappointing him as a child fears disappointing a loving father? If you fear God like that then you will have a tremendous incentive to do your duty in all things for in everything you will seek to please the Lord.

So fearing God is our second duty which leads naturally to the third. King Solomon said, “The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God, and keep his commandments; for that is the whole duty of everyone.” (Eccl. 12:13) If we fear God then we will want to keep his commandments – not so much to avoid punishment for violations or infractions – but because we want to please him in all we do.

But how are we to obey all of the commandments? After all, according to our Jewish friends, there are 613 commandments listed in the first 5 books of the Bible alone. And that doesn’t include all of the other commandments contained in the Old and New Testaments.

How can we possibly keep all of these commandments? We can’t! You see, we are sinful and imperfect creatures. We cannot possibly keep all of the commandments of God in our fallen, faulty, and sinful state. Fortunately, God sent his Son Jesus to keep the commandments for us. Jesus lived a perfect life, obeyed the law in all respects and fulfilled all righteousness on our behalf. And he shares his righteousness with all who believe in him. In other words, he credits his perfect obedience to our account when we put our faith in him.

The Bible puts it this way in Romans 3:21-24 in the New Living Translation: “God has shown us a way to be made right with him without keeping the requirements of the law, as was promised in the writings of Moses and the prophets long ago. We are made right with God by placing our faith in Jesus Christ. And this is true for everyone who believes, no matter who we are. For everyone has sinned; we all fall short of God’s glorious standard. Yet God freely and graciously declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins.” And Romans 10:4
adds this: “Christ is the end (or fulfillment) of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.”

Yes, Jesus lived a perfect life, obeyed the law in all respects, and fulfilled all righteousness on our behalf. And he shares his righteousness with all who believe in him. In other words, he credits his perfect obedience to our account when we put our faith in him. Does this mean that we no longer need to obey God – that we are free to disobey God because Christ has already obeyed on our behalf? Of course not! Instead, it means we no longer obey God in a vain attempt to earn his favor but rather, we obey God because we are grateful for the favor he has already given us in his Son who shares his righteousness with sinners like us.iv

And so, what is our duty to God? In the words of Ecclesiastes, we are to remember our Creator in the days of our youth. We are to fear him. In other words, we are to reverence, respect and love him. And finally, we are to keep his commandments, not because we are afraid of punishment, but because we are grateful to the God who sent his Son to share his righteousness with us thus making us acceptable to God. Remember, reverence, and obey. This is the whole duty of man.

My friends, if you do your duty to God then all other duties will fall into place; for if you do your duty to God then you will be the best citizen and the best Sailor you could ever hope to be. And you will shine like stars in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation. (Phl. 2:15)

Let me close with a true story that comes from the Revolutionary War. On May 19th, 1780, an abnormal darkness came over New England and parts of Canada. To this day, historians are unsure of the cause. Some think it may have been caused by the smoke of forest fires mingling with a very thick fog. Be that as it may, the darkness was so deep and abnormal that some thought it was a harbinger of the Last Judgment and terror struck the hearts of many. It so happened that the Connecticut State Council was in session at the time and some called for an immediate adjournment. Upon hearing this, a member of the Council, Colonel Abraham Davenport, said, “I am against an adjournment. The day of judgment is either approaching, or it is not. If it is not, there is no cause of an adjournment: if it is, I choose to be found doing my duty. I wish therefore that candles may be brought.”v

Friends, there will be many occasions in life when circumstances will tempt you to adjourn and to abandon your clear and definite duties. In times like those, may you always do what is expected of you; may you always be found doing your duty for God and country! Jesus said, “You are the light of the world.” (Mt. 5:14) In the darkest of times, I urge you, break out the candles and stand to your duty! Amen.

Ibid, p. 452.


See Romans 6 for a detailed discussion of this very issue.

http://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Abraham_Davenport