

Much obliged: Romans 8:12-17

by [Rob Merola](#) in the [May 30, 2006](#) issue

Rephibia is the kind of pet store that most other stores don't want around. It doesn't carry cats or dogs or anything else that is cute and cuddly. All its animals are cold-blooded, and some are quite large. The first thing you see as you walk in the door is a massive python almost 18 feet long. But there are also monitor lizards that are bigger than most dogs, frogs the size of dinner plates (they look strangely like Jabba the Hutt), and even an alligator snapping turtle that is so big you think it might be older than you are.

Because most people don't even want to know that animals like these exist, the store is not located in the best part of town. So, when the guy who comes in on Christmas Eve is slightly inebriated, the owner (Tommy Montrose) is not surprised. He has seen far worse. The customer explains that he has always wanted a python and has finally figured out how to get it. He'll give it to his wife as a present for Christmas! (As Dave Barry would say, I'm not making this story up.)

He doesn't want a small one either. The snake he selects is over ten feet long. He figures that since snakes like to hide in tight, dark places, he can wrap it up in a box and put it under the Christmas tree, and it will be fine. It will stay put, happy and content, until the gift is opened on Christmas morning. The customer has convinced himself that his wife will love it.

That is his plan, but as we all know, plans often have a life of their own. He purchases the serpent, wraps it up, goes home and puts the box under the tree with the rest of the presents. Then he goes upstairs and passes out on the bed.

A little before three in the morning, his wife tries to wake him. She thinks she's heard a crash in the living room. She's afraid someone is in the house. Her husband is in a stupor and is not easily roused, so when she hears another sound she decides to check it out for herself. Taking a flashlight, she heads toward the sound. She freezes. Someone is in the house and has knocked the Christmas tree down! As she shines her light on the tree, she notices movement. And then she sees a triangular head with unblinking slits for eyes, and the flickering of a forked tongue.

The head is disturbingly large.

As it turns out, the heat from the lights on the tree raised the blood temperature of the snake so that it became active. It didn't wait for Christmas morning.

Back at Rephibia, Tommy comes into the store as he does every day, including Christmas, to take care of the animals. He is surprised to see there are so many messages on his answering machine. Listening to them, he finds they are all from one man who's been calling every 15 minutes since 3 a.m., when his wife finally managed to awaken him. There is a lot of yelling in the background.

Surprisingly, his wife didn't like the present. In fact, she is saying—with completely believable conviction—that the marriage is over if he doesn't return it.

What should Tommy do? A sale is a sale, and frankly it was nice to have the extra Christmas cash. If the guy doesn't want the snake, he can give it to a zoo. In fact, the location of this story being Florida, Tommy knows a lot of people choose to let their animals go. Technically, this isn't his problem. Tommy, however, doesn't run Rephibia for the money. He is in many ways a boy who never outgrew his snake phase, and his animals are his passion. The simple truth is, he cares about them. And in caring, there is an obligation.

He takes the snake back.

Like Tommy, we too have an obligation. It's a strong word. According to the dictionary, *obligation* carries ideas of being constrained, bound, compelled and indebted. Synonyms include such words as *accountability*, *burden* and *commitment*. In Romans, Paul doesn't specifically say to what or to whom we are obligated, but the context makes it clear. We are obligated to God, and we satisfy that obligation by following the leading of the Spirit of Christ.

That means that if we choose to honor our obligation, our course of action in any given circumstance will be tied to our duty as Christians, the sense of indebtedness we feel to Jesus Christ for all he has done for us, and the moral requirements of living a life worthy of our Lord. But perhaps most important, the things we do will be shaped by our love for our Savior.

Obligation, if it is honored, will certainly restrict one's choices and limit possibilities. It will narrow one's path. It will stipulate a specific response.

In a world increasingly marked and motivated by fear, obligation requires us to live as children secure in our heavenly Father's love. We are freed from having to lash out and take revenge, choosing instead to overcome evil with good. In a society that is increasingly marked by self-centered consumption, obligation calls us to be willing to suffer with Christ, to sacrifice what we have in order to help others.

But make no mistake. For children of God and coheirs of Christ who are led by the Spirit, our obligation is not something carried out begrudgingly and with resentment. It is the expression of our deepest love and truest heart, a clear and unambiguous proclamation to the world of how much we care about God, others and living life well.