

The Philosophy of the First Degree

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In the first place I must express my appreciation of the honor which was given to my Grand Lodge of Alberta and myself in being invited to prepare an address to this highly selective body of distinguished Freemasons, representing as it does such a large number of brethren who have at some time requested a petition for admission to this most ancient and honorable institution. During my peregrinations over the length and breadth of my jurisdiction, stretching fourteen hundred miles north of the boundary to the Arctic Circle and four hundred miles east from the Rocky Mountains to the westerly boundary of our neighboring jurisdiction to the east, I have endeavored to emphasize the universality of the science and ever present need for the brethren to practice outside of the Lodge those precepts of virtue which are so beautifully inculcated within it. I have been conscious of the wishes, nay the heartfelt appeal, of many of our brethren who are away from centres where Masonic education is more readily available, for some enlightenment on the significance of the symbols and work and lectures and charges.

Hitchcock in his *Alchemy and Alchemist*, written in 1857, quotes an old Hermetic philosopher as saying "although a man be poor, yet may he very well attain to perfection" and on commenting on this he says, "That is, every man, no matter how humble his vocation, may do the best he can in his place - may love mercy, do justly and walk humbly with God; and what more doth God require of any man." It would appear, therefore that even the symbols of the *Alchemist* have an affinity with the symbols of the spiritual temple of Freemasonry.

In all my work in Lodge I have always been impressed with the deep spiritual and ethical value of the lessons portrayed in the First Degree. I agree that the three degrees supply a well rounded and abiding series of principles which should carry one through all the vicissitudes of life, but the first degree, as is proper, packs a punch which brings a man up smart to realize that here is something steeped in fundamentals for a definite "way of life."

The dictionary defines philosophy as 'the general principles, laws or causes that furnish the rational explanation of anything - practical wisdom.' This being so I feel that I cannot do better than to use as a basis for my subject, the procedure which is provided in order to become an Entered Apprentice. Voltaire, one of the great philosophers and a Freemason, said "the discovery of that which is true and the practice of that which is good are the two most important objects of philosophy."

When one has asked for and receives a "petition" and this, vouched for by two brethren, is presented in open Lodge, then other brethren are assigned, to assure themselves of the worthiness of the petitioner. Certain attributes should be looked for here, such as the likelihood of keeping confidences the tendency towards fidelity and loyalty and whether or not there would be a risk of the petitioner to balk at the need for obedience. There should also be given some idea of the need, on the part of the petitioner, for a spiritual atmosphere in his attitude, having in mind the questions which will be asked of him if he should be so fortunate as to be admitted, and it is the nature of these questions which point out the basic principles inherent in the Masonic philosophy.

The question requiring a declaration of freedom of approach, of being of an age of responsibility and of a genuine desire for knowledge and a sincere wish to become more extensively serviceable to mankind, illustrate one of the basic philosophies of Freemasonry, "The brotherhood of man".

There are also certain questions regarding ones belief in God and the immortality of the soul to which an unequivocal answer in the affirmative is essential, thus emphasizing another basic philosophy, "The fatherhood of God".

We have not yet secured admission but have been challenged with the type of organization we are about to be admitted into and when we do gain admission into the Lodge, erected to God and dedicated to the Holy Saints John, an intercession is made to God for our assistance to so dedicate and devote our lives to His service that we may be enabled to display the beauties of true godliness. After this, when an admission has been made of our trust in God in times of difficulty, we are assured of the safety in following the guide.

This point is surely one where the 133rd Psalm is applicable "Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity; It is like the precious ointment upon the head that ran down upon the beard, even Aaron's beard; that went down to the skirts of his garments; as the dew of Hermon and as the dew that descended upon the mountains of Zion; for there the Lord commanded the blessing, even life for evermore," and should be used as an example of the relationship of the "brotherhood of man" to the "Fatherhood of God".

After the preliminary perambulations, the charge of the Master, which puts the whole matter squarely up to the candidate and outlines in a different way, the design of the institution, to make its votaries wiser, better and consequently happier, never weary in well doing; naturally seeking each others welfare and happiness equally with their own, would almost seem to give the real summary of the lessons portrayed in the first degree, but we have only started, because we are admonished in connection with the wearing of the apron, "to let its pure and spotless surface be to you an ever present reminder of purity of life and rectitude of conduct, a never ending argument of nobler deeds, for higher thoughts, for greater achievements," until when we stand before the Throne of God we shall have earned the judgment, "Well done, good and faithful servant, thou hast been faithful over a few things. I will make thee ruler over many things; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord".

Then comes the great lesson on Charity, beautifully taught in a never forgettable manner, calling for that lovely verse:

We give thee but thine own
What ere the gift may be
All that we have is thine alone
A trust, O Lord, from Thee
To comfort and to bless,
To find a balm for woe
To tend the lone and fatherless,
Is Angels' work below.

In various parts of this degree we are taught the universality of Freemasonry and that a Mason's charity should know no bounds save prudence.

"The Lodge represents the world and includes both Heaven and Earth. Ancient Temple formations consisted of a double square end to end, one representing Heaven and the other representing Earth. In the middle were three cubes, one above the other representing a primary Trinity. Here the mortal soul is blended with the immortal spirit. The initiate has his eyes opened to a new world and he will not pass out of the Lodge as quite the same man as he entered it. Hence the term "Universality."

Charity being linked up in the same paragraph as Universality has a very deep significance because it illustrates the limitless area which this virtue of all virtues covers. I think this was the principle intended to be inculcated. There would appear to be a corollary in the expression later on with reference to initiation wherein it is stated that a Mason is instructed in proper exercise of UNIVERSAL BENEFICENCE AND CHARITY and to seek solace of his own distress by extending relief and consolation to his Fellow Creatures in the hours of their affliction. Notice the emphasis on the UNIVERSALITY. In other words the reference to a "Mason's Charity knowing no bounds" refers not only to the extent but the area.

The golden rule "To do unto others as you would wish they should do unto you" takes on a new meaning when applied to the lessons herein contained.

It would be well at this point to deal with the quality of Charity and to consider what it consists of. To give money to the poor is a beautiful act but hardly as important as to give love, unstinted, without hope of gain or reward - this indeed may well extend to the very feet of the Great White Throne. If we read what St. Paul says about Charity we will still see that it is limitless in degree. In the King James version of the Holy Bible the word of "love" was substituted for the word "Charity".

"Though I speak with the tongues of men and angels, and have not love, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling symbol.

And though I have the gift of prophecy, and understand all mysteries, and all knowledge; and though I have all faith, so that I could remove mountains, and not have love, I am nothing.

And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not love, it profiteth me nothing.

Love suffereth long, and is kind; Love envieth not: Love vaunteth not itself, is not puffed up.

Doth not behave itself unseemly, seeketh not her own, is not easily provoked, thinketh no evil.

Rejoiceth not in iniquity, but rejoiceth in the truth.

Beareth all things, believeth all things, hopeth all things, endureth all things.

Love never faileth; but whether there be prophecies, they shall fail; whether there be tongues, they shall cease, whether there be knowledge, it shall vanish away.

For we know in part, and we prophesy in part.

But when that which is perfected has come, then that which is in part shall be done away.

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away my childish things.

For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.

And now abideth faith, hope, love these three; but the greatest of these is love.

It is of such charity that a Mason's faith is made. He is, indeed, taught the beauty of giving that which is material; the Rite of Destitution shows forth the tender lesson in the first degree; Masonic Homes, Schools, Foundations, Orphanages, Hospitals, are the living exponents of the charity which means to give from a plenty to those who have but a paucity.

The first of the principal tenets of our profession and the third round of Jacob's ladder are really one; brotherly love is "the greatest of these" and only when a Mason takes to his heart the reading of charity to be more than alms, does he see the glory of that moral structure the door to which Freemasonry so gently, but so widely opens.

Charity of thought for an erring Brother; charity which lays a brotherly hand on a troubled shoulder in comfort; charity which exults with the happy and finds joy in his success; charity which sorrows with the grieving, and drops a tear in sympathy; charity which opens the heart as well as the pocket book; charity which stretches forth a hand of hope to the hopeless, which brings a new faith to the crushed ... aye, these, indeed, may "extend through the boundless realms of eternity."

Man is never so close to the divine as when he loves; it is because of that fact that charity, (meaning love), rather than faith or hope, is truly, "the greatest of these."

Even if the foregoing were not enough, we have the admonition to so divide our time as to leave a goodly portion to the service of God and a distressed brother, also to divest our hearts and consciences of all the vices and superfluities of life, thereby fitting our minds as living stones for that spiritual building - that house not made with hands eternal in the heavens. All of this, being as it is a summary of God's work, surely emphasizes that in Freemasonry we embark on a "Way of life" in tune with and applied to the practical work of God. There is no place in the life of a Freemason when he has any right to be idle because there is always something to do. The Preacher in Ecclesiastes III. says "To everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under Heaven," and you will notice as he goes on to illustrate the various allotments of time, he never indicates a situation where time can be wasted. Albert Pike made himself a learned scholar by his constant use of all his time, so did Abraham Lincoln.

The one great jewel in our Masonic fraternity is the Holy Bible or the volume of the Sacred Law. It is the Great Light which illustrates the will of God for mankind in whatever situation he may find himself. The true "way of life" is depicted herein and it is the revelation to all truth. The Golden Rule originates here and so does the Commandment "Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." The Golden Rule in our first degree is included in the following "to your neighbor in acting upon the square and doing unto him as you would wish he should do unto you."

The expression "acting upon the square" is a very significant expression because the square is the symbol most commonly associated with Freemasonry. From most ancient times it has been the emblem of correctness and uprightness. Even at the building of the Pyramids in their endeavor to have the placements arranged so that certain points, corners or openings might face the sun or a star at a particular time, the builder laid down a cross axis at a right angle to the main axis. Mencius nearly 300 B.C. taught in one chapter "that just as the most skilled artificers are unable without square and compasses to produce perfect rectangles or perfect circles, so must all men apply these tools figuratively to their lives, with the level marking line besides, if they would walk in the straight and even paths of wisdom, and keep themselves within the bounds of honour and virtue." The nature of the square is as unchanging as truth and it is in its very antiquity that we have a deep lesson. The operative Masons symbolized it as their base for right building and right living.

The Compasses, the points of which are thus far hidden from view, indicate the need for us to circumscribe our desires and keep our passions within due bounds with all mankind. Here again our symbol is steeped in antiquity in keeping with the square.

From age to age they have always represented heavenly things and may justly be called the spiritual working tools. The Perfect Square is a figure which can be drawn in or about a circle and so the earthly life of man moves and is built in and about the Divine Circle of life and law and love which surrounds and sustains and explains it. To know ourselves is the first principle of Wisdom, without which we may lose self respect and thus lose the respect for others which is disastrous. The Compasses, rightly used teach us about Liberty based on law. Most of our life is based on habit and ruled by opinion and custom but the realm of desire, emotion and motive need circumscription. Properly instructed the Mason will rest the point in the centre of his innermost being and draw a circle beyond the bounds of which he will not go until ready to go further; then he will draw another and another until he attains a full, balanced and finely poised life. We must apply the Compasses if we would have our own faith fulfill itself in fellowship.

So too the Ornaments, Lights and Jewels emphasize the practice of every virtue and, in the situation of a Lodge - E. to W., reference is made to three divine offerings which met with divine approbation of unselfishness and service. In every symbol there is a lesson pertaining to and illustrating some characteristic of Brotherly Love and the Fatherhood of God.

In one of the charges in the first degree we are enjoined to be exemplary in the discharge of our civil duties by never performing or even countenancing any act which might tend to subvert the peace and good order of society, but to pay due obedience to the laws of any state in which we reside. This admonition is a clear manifesto to all who are admitted that they must be good loyal citizens always alert to the needs of our local authority, (be it either a hamlet or a metropolis) to our State and to our Federal Government; and ready to do anything or make any sacrifice to maintain its honour and further its development, economically, socially, administratively, educationally or in any other manner as will best conduce to the preservation of our democratic way of life.

The turbulence of the state of affairs today only emphasizes my previous statement that a Mason has no right to be idle and as it is the duty of the Master to afford light and instruction and to show him how to practice outside of the Lodge the great moral precepts which are ever inculcated within it, and thus keep him from idleness.

We are beset by so many and great dangers through the machinations of those who have set themselves as leaders of groups by sheer brutality and by holding them in a state of fear even of themselves, refusing any acknowledgment of the existence of God and liquidating those who do so believe, particularly Freemasons, knowing full well that they would only hinder and oppose the vicious practices they wish to force upon the subjective groups. By an open denial of God they are not obligated to the truth nor to the other fine characteristics outlined in the Holy Bible and man is a mere cog in the wheel of the State instead of, as is the case with us, of the State existing for the benefit of the people by the people and for the people. The blandishments of this type of oligarchy hold out temptations to people who would otherwise be content and this gullible type is preyed upon to infiltrate the society of States which could otherwise be happy. The propaganda is vicious and I would again emphasize that Freemasons should be ever alert and never idle in upholding the precepts of the fraternity, by endeavoring to reclaim the faltering and aiding to stamp out the incorrigible, thus preserving the harmony and good fellowship of our democratic and God-loving way of life.

The philosophy seems to me to be the teaching of the practical application of the Brotherhood of man and that this is attained when we are conscious of being the Children or Sons of God.

It teaches us the efficacy of prayer and the value of the Eternal Word of God, from which we are exhorted to eschew those things which blight the soul such as Pride, the deadliest sin which binds the eyes to truth; Envy, which can envelope the whole person like a fog, sears what it touches; Anger, which prevents straight thought, produces unhappiness and is sometimes an explosion against frustration; Covetousness, the veritable lust for things and the instigator of crime; Gluttony, which smothers the soul; Lust, the perverter of a God-given beautiful relationship.

Instead of all these we are taught to improve ourselves and to cultivate hospitality, a true Masonic virtue; kind services, graceful courtesies; cheerful assistance and relief; integrity; sincerity; citizen ship; and finally that virtue which from its beginnings Freemasonry has tried to develop - Character; which is described by Macduff as follows:

"Character is the product of daily, hourly, actions, words and thoughts:-

Daily forgiveness
Unselfishness
Kindness
Sympathies
Charitability
sacrifices for the good of others
struggles against temptation
submissiveness under trial.

It is like the blending of colors in a picture, or the blending notes of music, which constitute the man.

And TRUE CULTURE as illustrated below:
The highest culture is to speak no ill
The best reformer is the man whose eyes
Are quick to see all beauty and all worth
And by his own descreet, well ordered life
Alone reproves the erring.
When thy gaze

Turns in on thine own soul, be most severe,
But when it falls upon a fellow man
Let kindness control it, and refrain
From that belittling censure that springs forth,
From common lips like weeds from marshy soil.

In other words we should, with St. Paul in the Epistle to the Ephesians, "Put on the whole armour of God, that we may be able to stand against the wiles of the Devil. For we wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places. Wherefore take unto you the whole armour of God, that we may be able to withstand in the evil day and, having done all, to stand. Stand, therefore, having our loins girt about with TRUTH and having on the breastplate of RIGHTEOUSNESS; and your feet shod with preparation of the GOSPEL OF PEACE; above all, taking the shield of FAITH; wherewith ye shall be able to quench the fiery darts of the wicked. And take the helmet of SALVATION and the sword of the SPIRIT, which is the word of God; praying always with all prayer and supplication in the Spirit, and watching thereunto with all perseverance and supplication for all saints.

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