

The Lessons of Masonry

Have you ever wondered if there was some lesson or meaning you missed when you took your first degree? Think about it for a minute I'm sure there were actually times when you did wonder if there was more you were supposed to learn. Have you ever heard the old definition of Masonry "We take good men and make them better" and wondered what the heck that really means? Most everyone just takes that phrase at face value. However, there are deeper meanings that are hidden in each Ritual that we are supposed to explore. If all you remember (for the most part) is what was said to you during your initiation, then there is a lot more to learn. If you were asked, what were the lessons of the first degree, would you be able to answer? Would you be able to remember what Masonic secrets were imparted during that first degree? Most Masons would have a real problem with that question. We know what some of the obvious meanings in the EA Ritual are, but what are some of the hidden meanings? We spend way too much time agonizing over getting new members into Lodge and not near enough time

teaching the lessons of Masonry along with the spiritual and moral implications of them. Learning the Ritual is all well and good, but they are only words without meaning if you don't understand what they are trying to teach you.

Before we can explore the meanings of any of our Rituals, we must first understand what Masonry really is, or is supposed to be. We are told that Masonry is a “system of morality, veiled in allegory, and illustrated by symbols.” Again, what the heck does THAT really mean? Actually this is the most accurate, most beautiful, and the most comprehensive definition of Masonry in as few words as has ever been given. When it is broken down into its several parts, it becomes clearer:

It truly is a System. It is not just a hodge - podge of rules, maxims, and precepts thrown together without order or design.

It is a system of Morality. Morality is the “doctrine of the right and wrong in human conduct”

It is veiled in Allegory. An allegory is a story that has a deeper or more general meaning in addition to its surface meaning.

It is illustrated by Symbols. What might be otherwise unintelligible in the allegory is made plain by the symbols accompanying it.

Therefore, in plain words, Masonry is a clear and orderly program of instruction in living your life in a moral and spiritual way, and the use of words, phrases, and symbols are used to identify and understand the more profound and deeper lessons that are not as readily seen on the surface.

The reality is that Masonry is many things. It is different things to different people.

For some, it is only a weekly or monthly gathering of friends and Brothers to share good fellowship and a meal. For others, it is only performing in the Ritual and teaching and training new members in the memory work. For some, it is only attending business meetings of the Lodge or being involved in the charitable works of the Lodge and the Fraternity. For still others, it is only becoming an officer of their Lodge and helping to direct its activities. But, for many Masons, it is all of these things. But Masonry is really meant to be a philosophy of life.

Now you might ask, what is a philosophy. If you look up the word philosophy in the dictionary, you will find that philosophy is:

- 1. The love and pursuit of wisdom by intellectual means and moral self-discipline.**
- 2. The investigation of the nature, causes, or principles of reality, knowledge, or values, based on logical reasoning rather than empirical methods.**
- 3. The critical analysis of fundamental assumptions or beliefs.**
- 4. It is a system of values by which one lives.**

So, there you have it; those four definitions of philosophy sound a whole lot like four definitions of Masonry, don't they? Masonry is intended to be a philosophy and a way of living one's life. It is not intended that a man be initiated, passed, and raised and then stop seeking knowledge. It is intended that the search for knowledge be more zealous as one progresses through the degrees and continues throughout his life. Masonry is meant to provide among other things the means to answer the three

questions that every man has asked or will ask at some point in his life. Those questions, simply put, are: where did I come from, what is my purpose here, and where am I going? It is hoped that a student of Masonry will always be studious and inquiring as to the deeper, more hidden meanings of the lessons of our Rituals. It is not meant that the inquiring mind be satisfied only with the obvious and easily seen meanings. To gain all there is to gain from Masonry, it must be constantly studied during one's life.

What makes a man a Mason? From a ritualist point of view, some will say the obligation. However, in today's world of information technology, you can find out just about anything you want to know from the TV or the internet. Just because a man may know how to operate his TV remote and he learns from the History Channel, the signs, grips and may know some or all the words, it doesn't make him a Mason. When a man grips your hand with "that grip" and you look into his eyes you can see in an instant whether he is a Mason and a Brother. No man can fake what is in his heart. These grips, words, and recognition signals no more make a man a Mason than wearing boots and a hat makes a man a cowboy. They do not grant an imposter

access to any secrets or knowledge of our Craft. They will, however, serve to completely confuse any imposter when he fails to find the “treasures” he seeks. These grips, words, and recognition symbols will prove worthless unless he knows what he seeks. No, a Man is not a Brother Mason until he has himself gone through the process of initiation, passing, and raising and learned the lessons of the Ritual as required by our Grand Lodge laws. And sadly, even then some men are never really Masons. Just remember that by being initiated into the Entered Apprentice Degree, passed to the Degree of Fellowcraft, and raised to the Sublime Degree of a Master Mason and learning the lessons of those degrees, there has been laid for you a lasting foundation for a moral edifice upon the most sublime principles that mankind has ever known. Once a Master Mason, you have acquired the basic working tools and a wealth of inspiration to follow that philosophical path of study, and your inquiring mind may rove for a lifetime and never exhaust the opportunities.

I read a Masonic paper the other day quoting Sam J. Helm, Past Grand High Priest of the Grand Royal Arch Chapter of Texas, in

1924. This is what he said about Masonry: *“Masonry is an ocean of fraternity, and every Mason should sail its broad expanse, because its profound solemnity and matchless beauty can never be appreciated by those who merely wade in the shallows at the shore. The tides have rolled mighty waves upon its bosom, and the storms of centuries have lashed the billows into foam upon its surface, but beneath there have remained, undisturbed, and immutable, the principles of the Brotherhood of Man”*. What a profound quote! We should pay heed to this beautiful description of Masonry and adopt its lesson. As long as we, the members of our fraternity, decide to allow ourselves and our new candidates to just “wade along the shore”, the future of Masonry and the Fraternity at large will not grow and prosper. My Brethren, we have a golden opportunity right now to start a revolution in Masonry, because young men are searching for the things that Masonry has been providing its members for centuries. The lessons of Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth are basic truths of the ages and the key to our future. However, the study of the symbolism of the Degrees is the further study of Masonic philosophy that is missing in most Lodges today. We

have forgotten how to be instructors to the new “children” of our fraternity. We must take these new Brethren by the hand and lead them as you would your own child in teaching them how to be better men. We brag about doing that, but are we really? Before World War II, we did a much better job of teaching our Candidates. Toward the end of World War II, we had so many Candidates coming thru our doors that we concentrated on just teaching the questions and answers and left the new member on his own to find out about the other lessons in Masonry - its rich history, its philosophy of how you should believe in God and live your life as a good citizen, and how to stand-up for justice and be a patriotic citizen and serve your country and your fellowman. All these are lessons that the Masonic student should be taught as we continue to explore the tenants of our fraternity and expand our own knowledge of God, the Great Architect of the Universe and the science of nature.

The Voice of Masonry from years past gives us a glimpse of some of the thoughts of our forefathers in these words:

Thousands of people tread the earth and behold the sky without discerning any of the beauties or wisdom they display.

They look upon a landscape, beautifully ornamented with trees, shrubs, plants, and flowers, but receive no definite impression of any part of it, and could not name or describe few objects thereon.

They behold the starry canopy above them, but see no constellations, no planets, and no movements indicating the wisdom, the power, and the glory of the Great Architect of the Universe.

So, it is with many who are admitted into Freemasonry. They observe the forms, the ceremonies, the emblems, and the jewels, and they hear the lectures and charges, but fail to discern the ethics and philosophy of those lessons.

They hear the phrase – “Freemasonry is a system of morality, veiled in allegory, and illustrated by symbols,” but do not fathom

its meaning and consequently do not solve the allegories nor discern the significance of the symbols.

They are in the temple, but do not get the temple idea. They are among the workmen, but do not see that they are all to be master builders for time and eternity.

They are in the light, but do not receive and apply it as the great means of fitting themselves as living stones for the temple not made with hands, eternal in the heavens.

The Ritual is beautiful, and should be mastered and impressively communicated. Nevertheless, the Ritual is but the burr, the hull, the husk to the wisdom, the strength, and the beauty of Freemasonry.

The Ritual conceals gems of unparalleled richness and beauty, which must be searched for diligently and faithfully if they shall be found and enjoyed.

Oh! That all the Craft would realize this fact and act accordingly, they would be better supplied and armed with truth, better animated with faith, hope and charity, and be better enabled to build the temple of the soul and, in turn, build for the future of Masonry and mankind.

Brethren, this is the Heritage our forefathers left us. It's now time for us to Preserve Our Heritage by putting those lessons into action and Build Masonry for the Future!