

## WHAT IS FREEMASONRY?

Freemasonry summons good men to be better men, and better men to be good. Freemasonry acknowledges that each man and woman is a divine mixture of good and evil. The Great Architect of the Universe has endowed us with free will to make moral and ethical choices. Freemasonry understands the frailties of human nature, and therefore the Fraternity teaches us to circumscribe our desires and keep our passions and prejudices within due bounds toward all humankind.

It is important that we listen and pay attention to the words of the ritual. To those members who do so, Freemasonry is like a “fire bell in the night” of the human condition. Words are not empty vessels to be defined at will by those who write or speak them. *Words have meaning.* Ideas and thoughts have no external reality until they are given form by the spoken or written word, and those ideas once expressed have **consequences** in thought and deed for those who hear or read them.

The words of the Masonic ritual summon us to bring the tenets and virtues of Freemasonry proactively into our daily lives—to practice Brotherly Love, to Relieve the distressed, to seek the Truth without hesitation, and to act with Justice toward all humankind.

By the exercise of Brotherly Love we are taught to regard the whole human species as one family, who, created by one Almighty Parent, are to aid

support and protect each other. To “exercise Brotherly Love” is to follow the Biblical injunction “to love thy neighbor as thyself.” We have all been taught that Freemasonry regards no man because of his worldly wealth or honors—it is the internal and not the external qualities which recommend a man to be made a Mason. Freemasonry does not regard men because of their race, color, religion, ethnic origins—it is only essential that a man be good and true. To be a good Mason, it simply does not matter if a man is black or white, Hispanic or Asian, Christian, Jewish, Moslem, or Hindu.

To “exercise Brotherly Love” is to improve ourselves in Masonry by incorporating these attitudes into how we view the world around us, and then acting on these beliefs in our everyday lives. To exercise Brotherly Love is therefore to respect and accept that each man and woman is a unique fellow creature, created by the Supreme Architect and Father of us all. By practicing Brotherly Love—respect and tolerance—in our everyday lives, we seek to cause true friendship to exist among those who might otherwise have remained at a perpetual distance. To the extent that we as Masons live by this still-revolutionary principle, we are a shining example to the society around us that men can restrain and overcome their passions and prejudices, and work together for the benefit of humankind.

To extend the helping hand of Relief to men and women in distress is the second great tenet of Freemasonry, and it is a corollary to the exercise of Brotherly Love. As members of the human family, we are linked by an ever-

growing chain of affection—first for those nearest and dearest to us, and in an ever-widening circle to friends of friends, and to their friends, and so on.

Our Entered Apprentice degree teaches us about Faith, Hope and Charity, and that the greatest of these is Charity. “Charity” comes from the Latin word for “love.” But charity can also be understood as doing the right thing by assisting another person in distress. The Hebrew word for “Charity” means justice and righteousness. Freemasonry teaches that Justice is “that standard or boundary of right which enables us to render unto every man his just due, without distinction.” Justice and righteousness are the ethical qualities of the Great Architect of the Universe upon which all other ethical commandments rest. Central to Freemasonry is the equitable treatment of individual men and women, so that every person receives their just due “without distinction” as to rank or wealth or honors, or any other external qualifications. Justice is therefore the very cement and support of civil society, for without Justice there can be no dignity and no freedom.

And so Freemasonry teaches us that we each have a responsibility and duty to aid and assist men and women in physical and emotional distress. We assist others not only because we care for them, but also because it is the right and just thing to do in our everyday lives.

Truth is the third great tenet of Freemasonry. This tenet is not emphasized when we speak of our gentle Craft, but it, along with Justice, are the two most powerful ideals of Freemasonry. Yes, we say that Truth is a

divine attribute and the foundation of every virtue. We are taught that being honest and truthful and fair in dealing with our fellow men and women is a virtue. We say that we as Masons are seeking Truth, but what does “seeking Truth” imply? To seek the Truth is to ask questions, and to ask questions is to be skeptical of the assumptions of conventional wisdom.

People who seek the Truth, and who dare speak the Truth to power, can be annoying and unpopular. Asking questions can be a dangerous and risky business. Socrates sought Truth by asking questions, and was condemned to death because people thought he threatened the social and political stability of Athens. Modern newspaper journalists, such as Daniel Pearl, have been murdered because they sought the Truth. Robert Kennedy once said that some people asked “Why?” He preferred to ask “Why not?”

The search for Truth is Freemasonry’s most powerful weapon in the 21<sup>st</sup> century’s quest to preserve and expand freedom and the dignity of the individual in an ever-more impersonal, technological society. The practice of Brotherly Love and the fight for Justice by individual Masons taking an active role in their communities can have a tremendous impact on the future of our towns and cities, states, and nations.

Listen to the words of the ritual. The true secret of Freemasonry is that its ideas are revolutionary and dangerous to those who would deny human dignity and promote injustice. Freemasonry as an institution is

properly non-political and must remain so. But as *individuals*, we can take action to apply the ideas of Freemasonry in everyday life.

Freemasonry teaches us to honor a constitutional, democratic, and orderly system of government that preserves and protects our liberties. Freemasonry encourages us as individuals to become involved in our local communities, to express our views to City Councils and Boards of Education, and even to hold office. Think about some of the ways in which you can become involved in your communities:

As individuals:

1. Write letters to local newspapers about important issues
2. Volunteer as a member of neighborhood clean-up organizations
3. Volunteer at a local church's meals program
4. Register voters for your favorite political party

As a Lodge:

1. Organize tutoring programs for a local elementary school
2. Participate in local and state campaigns for school bond proposals
3. Sponsor Masonic and community youth programs

Listen to the words of the ritual and resolve to practice out of the Lodge those great moral duties, which are inculcated in it. Only then can we each improve ourselves in Freemasonry, and in so doing improve the world around us.