

Defining Freemasonry

To Define the Essence Of Freemasonry, And to Understand Its Aim and Purpose, We Need Look No Farther Than The Entered Apprentice Degree

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April 21, 2020

Following his installation as Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky on October 17, 1957, M. W. Grand Master William O. Ware posed three questions to the Craft assembled:

- What is Freemasonry?
- What does Freemasonry mean to me?
- What do I mean to Freemasonry?
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All Masons engaged in a serious pursuit of Masonic light will address each of these questions at some point in their Masonic journey. Right now, we will consider the first of Grand Master Ware's questions: *What is Freemasonry?*

Generations of men have spent countless hours attempting to define Freemasonry. At the most superficial level, we can, with accuracy, define Freemasonry as the world's oldest and largest organization for men. Masonry, in some form, has existed from time immemorial. Freemasonry, as we know it and practice it, is roughly 300 years old, dating to the founding of the Grand Lodge of England in 1717.

If pressed, we might further define Freemasonry as a beautiful system of morality, veiled in allegory and illustrated by symbols.

But to define the essence of Freemasonry, and to understand its aim and purpose, we need look no farther than the Entered Apprentice Degree. The ritual of the Entered Apprentice Degree provides a simple formula that can be described as, "The Masonic Equation."

That formula is: *learning + self-discipline = equals self-improvement.*

Freemasonry is an organization in which men are equipped with the knowledge and tools that allow them to practice the self-discipline necessary for a rewarding and happy life, thereby drawing nearer to their Creator, the Grand Architect of the Universe. During the course of the Degree, we tell the candidate that the design of the Masonic institution is to make its votaries wiser, better and consequently, happier.

In this statement of purpose, drawn from our ritual, Freemasonry defines itself. No further definition is needed, and, indeed, to attempt to further define Freemasonry is to ultimately make it into something which it was never intended to be.

Freemasonry, through its ritual, defines itself. There is no “my Freemasonry” or “your Freemasonry.” There is only Freemasonry and its definition and purpose are clear and unambiguous.

The working tools presented to the new initiated Entered Apprentice focus on two of the most essential elements of self-discipline – time management and ridding oneself of non-productive (and possibly self-destructive) behaviors.

Each of us has within us the man that we wish to be. That man is our perfect ashlar. The working tools of the Entered Apprentice enable us to find that man within ourselves and transform the rough ashlar to the perfect.

The twenty-four-inch gauge teaches us time management. In applying the twenty-four-inch gauge to your life, do you find balance? How do the activities of your life fit into the categories of service to God and relief of a poor and distressed worthy Brother, the pursuit of your usual vocation and the refreshment and sleep necessary for all men? If there are behaviors in our lives that do not fit into any of these categories, it is time to honestly question the extent to which such behaviors stand between ourselves and the men we wish to become.

The common gavel teaches us to divest ourselves of vices and excesses that distract us from our goal and prevent us from reaching our potential as the men that we wish to be. The common gavel teaches us to distinguish between that which we desire and that which we genuinely need. What are the things that distract you, my Brother, and impede your progress in becoming that perfect ashlar?

It is said that **Freemasonry is a genius system**, and, indeed, it is. It is genius in that all of its components fit together flawlessly and in a completely complementary fashion. It is a system in that in order to function properly, all components must function effectively. Those with backgrounds in business and management are familiar with the concept of “Systems Thinking.” A system is designed to produce a specific result. If a component of the system is missing, or not functioning, the result has a ripple effect that may compromise the entire operation.

Freemasonry is an initiatory experience. Entered Apprentices are “initiated” into the mysteries of Freemasonry. Initiation is a rite of passage – a ceremony that marks a new beginning. The initiatory experience should be the beginning of a life changing journey. The experience of initiation requires the preparation of the candidate – not just

physically, but mentally and spiritually as well. Freemasonry offers both certain secrets and certain mysteries that are imparted in each Degree. The secrets are our various modes of recognition. Those are taught during the course of the Degree. The mysteries of Freemasonry, however, may only be revealed over a period of time. Such revelation occurs, if ever, only through the determined pursuit of the light to which each candidate is introduced in the Degrees of Freemasonry. The rite of initiation marks a transformation or re-birth of the candidate from an existence in darkness to a new place of spiritual and intellectual light. Freemasonry requires us to ask the question: Is the evidence of such transformation apparent in my Masonic journey?

Freemasonry is universal. It acknowledges the Brotherhood of man under the Fatherhood of God. It is open to men of all faiths, races, and creeds. The universal nature of Freemasonry is alluded to most clearly when we inform our candidates that Freemasonry brings together men who, without its influence, would have remained at a perpetual distance. The perpetual distances to which our ritual refers are not merely geographical (although such distances are included), but are also social, economic, cultural, racial, and religious.

While Freemasonry is universal, it is not a religion. Although Freemasonry requires a belief in a supreme being, it does not define such being. The purpose of our ritual is, in part, to purify our hearts and minds, transforming an ordinary Lodge room into a sacred space, rid of the distractions of the profane world and in which the immediate presence of the Grand Architect of the Universe is felt, and in which we reflect upon the construction of that spiritual temple, eternal in the heavens, not built with hands. Freemasonry addresses man's spiritual nature. Yet all of this notwithstanding, Freemasonry offers no plan of salvation. The practice of Freemasonry enhances one's religious beliefs, but cannot replace them or become a substitute for them.

Freemasonry can only be experienced actively. Freemasonry is not a passive pursuit. It is quite simple to distinguish between "members" and "Masons." As generations of Masons have been told, the mere act of being initiated into a Masonic Lodge does not make a man a Mason. The act of initiation lays a foundation on which a spiritual temple may be built and provides a blueprint for construction, but without a lifetime of labor, no edifice will ever rise. The practice of Freemasonry requires implementation of its lessons; and engaging in the work of self-improvement necessitates pro-longed and consistent effort. It is, quite frankly, the most difficult work that a man will ever undertake. The benefits of Freemasonry cannot be acquired through a passive approach. The practice of Freemasonry is a call to commitment and without that commitment a man may never be a Mason, regardless of the number of his years as a member.

Freemasonry is a call to continued learning. The Operative Entered Apprentice had as his ultimate objective the acquisition of the skills and knowledge necessary to

successfully demonstrate his mastery of his art and enable him to engage in the practice of his profession. As speculative Masons, we are called upon to continue to learn, so that we too acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to construct our spiritual temples. Indeed, when we have stopped learning, our personal growth and development as men has ended. As we continue to construct our individual temples, it is necessary that we continue to educate ourselves so that our unique temples will better reflect the beauty and the glory of the Craft that inspires us.

Freemasonry is an individual journey, yet it is practiced in close association with others who are on a similar journey. Freemasonry is not a fellowship club or a service organization. I am blessed to say that most of my closest friends are my fellow Masons. Like most of you, I enjoy the sweetness of Masonic Brotherhood and fellowship. Fellowship is an attribute of Freemasonry. Alone, it is not Freemasonry. Freemasonry is ultimately an individual journey. I am building my temple, not yours. It is impossible to be the builder of another Brother's temple. We meet in Lodge to encourage each other, to share our successes and failures and to equip ourselves for the daily journey on which we have embarked. While we embrace the attribute of fellowship, we must not mistake it, by itself, for Freemasonry.

The defining aim and purpose of Freemasonry is that which is stated so clearly in the Entered Apprentice Degree: to teach men to temper their desires, and, in so doing, achieve their potential for a more fulfilling life and draw nearer to their Creator.

This, Brothers, leads to a final point – **Freemasonry is not a casual endeavor**. Freemasonry is the work of a lifetime. It is serious work for serious men.

Collectively and individually, we are called upon to solemnly reflect upon the aim and purpose of Freemasonry – to learn to establish and exercise control over one's behavior and seek self-improvement daily. Let each of us apply the lessons of the Entered Apprentice Degree to our approach to Freemasonry and purge from our practices those things which are superfluous to our true aim and purpose and which serve only to distract us from our ultimate goal.

Grand Master Ware's other two questions, What does Freemasonry mean to me; And what do I mean to Freemasonry, have as many different responses as there are Freemasons. But there is only one answer to his initial question, *What is Freemasonry?* Freemasonry defines itself. To mistakenly substitute another definition may allow an individual to experience some of the attributes of Freemasonry, but will never afford that same individual the opportunity to achieve the transcendent experience of becoming wiser, better and consequently happier that comes from the full understanding and committed practice of Freemasonry as it defines itself.