

MAKING BETTER A GOOD MAN WALKING THE WALK

John W. Bizzack

To become a member of the Masonic Fraternity a man must meet the qualifications as established in his Masonic Jurisdiction, be unanimously approved by the body of the Lodge to which he applies, pay the fees required, and be initiated. If he proves proficient in the first two degrees, he may advance to the degree of Master Mason. Once made a Master Mason, he can call himself a Mason for the rest of his life, as long as he pays his annual dues and remains in good standing with his Lodge. He can, if he wishes, then apply for membership in appendant bodies, and, if admitted and advanced through their processes, pays his annual dues, and remains a member of a regularly chartered Masonic lodge, also remain a member of the appendant body for the rest of his life.

Once admitted, a man is regarded as a Mason even if he is scarcely involved in his lodge, or not at all. He is also regarded as a Mason should he regularly attend Lodge, actively participate in some way, sit on committees, eventually serves as an appointed or elected officer, and contributes to the constructive life of his Lodge.

Under which of those two circumstances is a man most likely to move from a membership-card-Mason to genuinely *becoming* a Freemason?

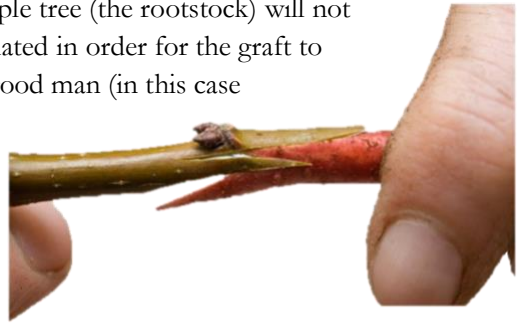
It might seem clear that the odds-on favorite would be the man who does the latter, since it appears in doing so he broadens his Masonic life. The prospect of that alone, however, does not always guarantee the man will *become* a Freemason, and move from the status of being just another card-carrying-member unless he also does what he says he came to Freemasonry to do in the first place: *to learn*.

Learning Freemasonry is not an effortless task, and in the absence of the necessary effort a man is like the person who is shown how to play three chords on a guitar and then considers himself a musician.

When we hear someone say a person “came from good stock” we understand, at least within the context of its literal meaning, that the term is intended as a compliment implying that could be anything from being healthy or strong or tall, to being ambitious or kind or philanthropic, honest, courteous, considerate, and generally, believed to be a good person. With literal roots traceable to medieval and ancient history, the agricultural field learned that grafting a young plant or tree to another more productive and hardy plant or tree, referred to as rootstock, produces a result that combines the best of both original plants. The term “good stock” came from rootstock.¹

¹ Becky Nelson Bramblings, “We Come From Good Stock,” *Eagle Times*, November 20, 2021, https://www.eagletimes.com/lifestyles/we-come-from-good-stock/article_de331da8-59da-11e8-81ad-ffd2a40e3d5b.html, accessed December 1, 2021. (Rootstock is the base and root portion of grafted plants. A scion, the flowering and/or fruiting part of the plant, is grafted onto rootstock for a variety of reasons. The scion and rootstock must be of closely related plant species in order for the graft to work. The rootstock is selected for its interaction with the soil, providing the roots and the stem to support the new plant, obtaining the necessary soil water and minerals, and resisting the relevant pests and diseases. Trees grafted from vigorous rootstock will grow faster and develop quicker).

In a way, a new Mason might be thought of as a candidate to be grafted to the rootstock. Even careful grafting, however, a young lemon tree, for example, to a hardy apple tree (the rootstock) will not produce better apples. The graft and rootstock must be closely related in order for the graft to work, thus a good man (a candidate) must be grafted to another good man (in this case a lodge and the good men in it) if the candidate is to grow into a better man, and maybe even *become* a Freemason. Sure, there may be some exceptions, when comparing this sort of grafting to the fraternity, but do some exceptions void the comparison? Hardly.



GRAFTING CANDIDATES

The concept of what has become a standard Masonic slogan, “Making Good Men Better,” is predicated on such grafting, as it were.

If we step away and, on the level, look at that bold slogan, we know good and well that every man admitted does not turn out to be the good man he was asserted to be when voted upon to be made a Mason. With no intent to disparage any Investigation Committee or Lodge that has had that experience, a term used excessively by elected public officials comes to mind: “Mistakes were made.”

There are reasons mistakes are made, of course, and they should be addressed and corrected, but perhaps what should also be corrected, or at least more finely tuned, is the “Making Good Men Better” slogan itself, and what it presumes.

Freemasonry cannot make good men better unless a “good man” genuinely seeks to become better by doing exactly what he says he came to Freemasonry to do: *to learn*. We should be much more mindful that part of the meaning of being a *good man* is also keeping our word—living up to the obligations we take of own free will and accord. In the absence of that, the grafting of a candidate to Freemasonry will not work.

Now, on the level, let us also acknowledge that there are members who say that their lodge offers them little more (sometimes nothing more) than what they might glean by merely passing through the degrees. In that case, a member has options to do something about understanding what he experienced, and to learn more by reading, self-study, visiting another lodge that offers more, seeking out and engaging another member who

Freemasonry cannot make good men better unless a “good man” genuinely seeks to become better by doing exactly what he says he came to Freemasonry to do: to learn.

may welcome such inquiry and opportunity to mentor or assist — if they wish. Is learning required beyond what a member is exposed to when passing through ritual? Some may say no, but then again members, when they are admitted, do not say that they want to learn just enough to make them a member. The body of the lodge takes them at their word. The member is reminded and encouraged *to learn* again when he passes through the Second Degree of Masonry.

A member in such a situation can also, completely on his own, graft himself to a more seasoned member who may actually introduce him to many things about Freemasonry that he did not glean from being passed through the Three Degrees. Presumably, such a

seasoned member might offer more about Masonic lessons and philosophies, and help a good man find ways to pursue and apply them to his life that can help make better that good man.

Of course, there is always the possibility that such a member is not aware that there is more to Freemasonry than his lodge provides or finds no one in his lodge to serve as such a mentor. Thus, his early enthusiasm dampened, he does not seek more than he knows. If that is the case, then perhaps he will find another Lodge, maintain membership, but fade away from attending or participating in the lodge, or if he attends Lodge once in a while, he can join others who know only what they may have gathered from passing through degrees and, from time to time, maybe picking up something new by witnessing the degrees preferred on other candidates.

WALKING THE WALK

Freemasonry, when actually learned *and* practiced, *can* indeed shape our thoughts, and it is our thoughts that shape our lives. The words *learn* and *practice* should be obvious as key words.

Another way of looking at the truth in that reality is through another phrase that is a quote often attributed to Benjamin Franklin: *Well done is better than well said.*

Wearing Masonic rings, lapel pins, T-shirt, hats, and having a coffee cup at the office that says (or car decals that read) “I’m a Proud Mason” is nothing but empty boasting for the man who is made a member of the fraternity, but has not attended or participated in lodge since completing his most recent degree. In many cases, this describes the member who does not bother to seek more than what he may have picked up when passing through ritual. Some believe that kind of empty boasting carries with it a pinch of conceit for those who sleepwalk through their Masonic journey, thinking that all they ever need to do to *become* a Freemason, not merely a member, is to be piloted through our degrees, pay their dues, attend lodge once in a while (or never again after being made a member). Such men labor under the erroneous assumption that there is nothing more to learn, to read, to become more aware of or familiar with, or to pursue with effort and never actually *learn* how they might become better.

Perhaps, by first agreeing that part of being a good man is keeping your word, we might find more appropriate the slogan, “Making Better Good Men.”

Other phrases that might come to mind and convey the same prudent guidance: “Practice what you preach,” “Actions and behavior speak louder than words,” “Show me, don’t tell me,” “Suit the action to the word, the word to the action,” and, perhaps, the always appropriate wise counsel, “Walk the walk.”

Perhaps, by first agreeing that part of being a *good man* is keeping your word, we might find more appropriate the slogan, “Making Better Good Men.” This would save some face and at least suggest that good men who keep their word about why they came to Freemasonry and who lives up to the obligation taken, have a much better opportunity to *become* a Freemason than those who lumber through their journey still hoodwinked, or who carry a somewhat smug belief that the brief introduction most receive to the profound life-lessons in our three rituals is good enough, or somehow adequate, to justify calling themselves Freemasons.

One explanation of how the slogan supposedly works is commonly found in statements like: “Freemasonry provides its members with a philosophical outlook on life by conferring degrees and reinforcing these values through Lodge activities.”

The statement, while perhaps sufficient, makes the enormous assumption that all those admitted are actually provided that philosophical outlook through the mere conferral of the degrees alone. Another assumption is that the values are reinforced through Lodge activities, as if *all* who are admitted are involved and participate in them, and, therefore, become better men by whatever the activity referred to may be.

The laudable pursuit of Freemasonry might be thought of as a 50/50 proposition. One half is based on the necessity, no matter how difficult it might be, of admitting *only* good men. The other half is based on the necessity that Lodges offer, deliver, and consistently provide good and wholesome instruction to those good men. Our differences about, and in the definition of, both sides of that 50/50 proposition vary but seem to account for why we see so much of Freemasonry thought of as so many different things to so many members.

SLOGANEERING

Maybe the slogan “Through Freemasonry *It Is Possible That A Good Man Can Become An Even Better Man*” is a little more accurate.

Or, maybe, just to be more accurate in detail, the slogan should be:

Through Freemasonry It Is Possible That A Good Man Who Keeps His Word And Lives Up To The Obligation He Takes Of His Own Free Will And Accord, Learns, And Then, With Consistency, Applies The Principles Of The Craft To His Personal Life, Will Be More Likely To Become An Even Better Man.

Obviously, under the rule of thumb commonly used in effective sloganeering, both slogans are much too long. Besides, neither conform to what we have come to accept in the fraternity: abbreviation—particularly in educating members of not only our historical aim and purpose, but about the true depth as well as the breadth of Freemasonry itself.

One more phrase comes to mind, *You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make it drink*. This old proverb is true and false. You can lead a horse water and it will drink, but it helps if something is done to first make the horse thirsty.

The *Making Good Men Better* slogan is catchy and clever, and has probably attracted many to the fraternity since being introduced as the wide-spread catch-phrase it has become. This writing suggests only that we actually do what is implied by the slogan, and what is expected of good men who are admitted into the fraternity: *keep our word*—which means we admit only good men, and do what must be done to credibly make the proclamation that they have been made better once they become members.

If we believe that we have already been made or we are becoming better men through Freemasonry, we should ask what was it that made that happen. If your answer is *learning*, then you are living up to your word.

*Maybe the slogan
“Through Freemasonry
It Is Possible That A
Good Man Can Become
An Even Better Man”
is a little more accurate.*