

# WHAT IS FREEMASONRY?

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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?

All Masons engaged in a serious pursuit of Masonic light will address each of these questions at some point in their Masonic journey. This evening, we will consider the first of Grand Master Ware's questions: What is Freemasonry?

At the most superficial level, we probably all know that Freemasonry is 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.

In the opening ceremony of the Entered Apprentice Degree, the Master asks the Senior Warden, "What came you here to do?" The Senior Warden's familiar response is, "To learn, to subdue my passions and to improve myself in Masonry." Nowhere else in our ritual is our purpose so clearly and succinctly stated. Freemasonry is an organization in which men are equipped with the knowledge and tools to practice the self-discipline necessary for a rewarding and happy life. The Entered Apprentice Degree focuses on two of the most essential elements of self-discipline - time management and ridding oneself of non-productive (and possibly self-destructive) behaviors.

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. In Island Freemasonry, Kentucky author John Bizzack writes that ignoring Masonic education in our Lodges is an example of an incomplete system. The ripple effect is that many of our Lodges do not function in the manner in which they were intended. Since man cannot teach that which he does not know, our pool of common Masonic knowledge grows smaller while our dysfunction grows greater.

**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 following 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 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. Indeed, if men of good will would unite around the altar of Freemasonry, regardless of race, creed or religious differences, much of the world's turmoil would immediately cease. The universal nature of Freemasonry is alluded to most clearly in our ritual 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 social, economic, cultural, racial, and religious. Freemasonry is universal, but it is not a religion. While Freemasonry requires a belief in a supreme being, it does not define such being. The intent of our ritual is to purify our hearts and minds, transforming this ordinary Lodge room into a sacred space, in which the immediate presence of the Grand Architect of the Universe is felt, and in which we engage in 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." In the "Address to a Newly Raised Brother" found in Henry Pirtle's Kentucky Monitor, we are told that membership in a Masonic Lodge will not make a man a Mason any more than membership in a musical club will make a man a musician. A majority of our members can be offered as evidence of the accuracy of this statement. A recent study reveals that slightly more than 56% of the men on the membership rolls of the Grand Lodge of Kentucky are merely names on a list. Since being raised as a Master Mason, they have never actively participated in the life of their Lodge. Such men may call themselves Freemasons, but they are not practicing Freemasonry. The practice of Freemasonry requires implementation of the lessons of Freemasonry as taught in the several Degrees; 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. A clear majority of our members either never realize the true nature of the work of Freemasonry or, upon realization of what the practice of Freemasonry requires, simply aren't willing to commit the time and effort required to master the lessons of the Craft. 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 may never be a Mason, regardless of his years as a member.

**Freemasonry is a call to continued learning.** In the Fellow Craft Degree, we are charged to continue the study of the seven liberal arts and sciences. The Fellow Craft Degree is often referred to as the “Operative Degree.” The seven liberal arts and sciences were what an operative Mason needed to know (and master) to successfully practice his profession. As speculative Masons, we are called upon to continue to learn. Indeed, when we have stopped learning, our personal growth and development as men has stopped. In Observing the Craft, Andrew Hammer wrote that when societies cease to value knowledge and no longer have the discipline to attain it, they are in danger of self-destruction. 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 probably all here, 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 here 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.

**Freemasonry teaches the attribute of charity**, but it is not a charitable organization. Perhaps the greatest misunderstanding about our Fraternity is the misconception that we are a charitable organization. A survey of the attitudes of Kentucky Masons regarding the Characteristics of an Ideal Lodge undertaken by William O. Ware Lodge of Research reveals that about 75% of our members believe that our Lodges should place an emphasis on public charity. This is not our mission. We

practice charity, but such practice is an attribute of Freemasonry. It is not Freemasonry itself. To emphasize charity to the neglect of the original aim of self-improvement is akin to worshipping creation while ignoring the Creator.

The use of the word "charity" in our rituals mirrors the use of the word in the King James Version of the New Testament. The New Testament was originally written in Greek. The Greek language had three words for love: Eros, which described physical love; Phileo, which described brotherly love; and Agape, which described sacrificial love. Since the word agape did not translate well into English, the translators used the word that most closely captured the spirit of the word - charity. As the English language has evolved, the word charity has come to denote the act of giving to someone in need. While that is indeed a part of charity, it only represents a small portion of the original intent and meaning of the word used to describe the spirit of sacrificial love.

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

Grand Master William O. Ware recognized these truths. In his address to the Craft, he went on to say, "It will be my purpose as I travel about to not only attempt to give answers to these questions but also to refresh the memories of the brethren on this subject. It goes without saying that if the brethren of this Grand Jurisdiction would constantly put into practice in their daily lives the teachings of Freemasonry, we would develop such a force for good in this Grand Jurisdiction that our influence would be felt not only within but even beyond our borders. Confident that you will join with me in this endeavor to reawaken our brethren to the true meaning and purpose of Freemasonry, all of us, together with God's help, cannot fail to make Freemasonry in this Grand Jurisdiction what the founders of our fraternity fully intended that it should be - a beneficent power in the lives of each of us whereby we develop 'that Spiritual Temple, that house not made with hands, eternal in the Heavens' but also, through

brotherly love and affection, bring into being that true spirit of brotherhood that should always exist among God's children everywhere."

This, Brothers, leads me to my last point - **Freemasonry is not a casual endeavor**. Freemasonry is the work of a lifetime. It is serious work for serious men.

I call upon each person here this evening to solemnly reflect upon the aim and purpose of Freemasonry - to subjugate one's passions and desires and seek self-improvement daily. I urge that we 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.

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? To mistakenly answer that question may allow an individual to experience some of the attributes of Freemasonry, but will never afford the opportunity to achieve the transcendent experience that comes with the full understanding and committed practice of its true aim and purpose.

**Presented by:**

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