

The Behavioral Guide to Freemasonry

While there exist many versions of many ideas on what proper behavior should, or could be, a behavioral guide to Freemasonry doesn't exist in that sense. We do, however, have a guide found in what are the opening and closing charges. While covering every aspect of these charges would take considerable time, I would encourage any interested individual to take it upon yourself to carefully and thoughtfully analyze these charges and reach your own conclusions.

Paul Bessel's website, www.bessel.org, is perhaps the oldest existing website for information on Freemasonry. In 2015 he listed fifty-eight Grand Jurisdictions asking the question whether those jurisdictions used the closing charge in their stated meetings. They were offered a "YES, NO, or Optional" for an answer.

Thirty-two Grand Lodges either responded "NO," or did not respond at all, as to whether they conferred the closing charge. Eighteen answered with "Optional," most often leaving the decision with the sitting Master of the constituent Lodge. And eight Grand Jurisdictions reported that delivery of the closing charge as part of their Lodge meetings was required (or at least practiced with regularity). I am not certain if any of these have changed or altered their position since this data was offered in 2015.

We have a lot of charges in Freemasonry, and much to my dismay, all are largely ignored. After an obligation, no one remembers any of them. A charge, simply put, is a challenge. It is a shadow of the 18th century code of conduct a gentleman is bound to uphold that dares us to actually work at becoming better men.

These charges are somewhat universal across jurisdictions, with some wording only slightly different, perhaps arranged in different order, but for the most part easily recognizable across jurisdictional lines in the United States.

The charges presented here are contained in the Kentucky Monitor, arranged by Henry Pirtle from various masonic ritual composers and authors over the course of the first 200 years of speculative Freemasonry. Upon its formation in 1800, the Grand Lodge of Kentucky used as its constitution the Ahiman Rezon from the Grand Lodge of Virginia. Our Grand Lodge then promptly dismantled this document and created our own version of a constitution in 1808.

How many times have we watched Brothers repeat something they have memorized without knowing the meaning behind what those words mean? Perhaps we ourselves as ritualists are guilty of this as well.

The opening charge begins with this first line: *The WAYS of VIRTUE are beautiful* –

What are the virtues of which it is speaking? Temperance, Prudence, Fortitude and Justice- we all should have learned what these were in the Entered Apprentice degree.

Temperance: moderation or self-restraint in action and statement; self-control.

Temperance is the habitual moderation in the indulgence of a natural appetite or passion, especially in the use of alcoholic liquors. That definition is straight from Webster's Dictionary.

Prudence: the quality or fact of being prudent, or wise in practical affairs, as by providing for the future. Using caution with regard to practical matters; discretion

Fortitude: mental and emotional strength in facing difficulty, adversity, danger, or temptation courageously.

Justice: the quality of being just; righteousness, equitableness, or moral rightness: to uphold the justice of a cause. Justice is rightfulness or lawfulness; the moral principle determining just conduct.

Most virtue ethics theories take their inspiration from Aristotle who declared that a virtuous person is someone who has ideal character traits. These traits derive from natural internal tendencies, but need to be nurtured; however, once they are firmly established, they will become a stable part of our lives.

A virtuous person is someone who is kind across many situations over the period of a lifetime because that is their character – not because they want to maximize their utility or gain favors, or simply feel obligated to do their duty.

They do it inherently because they work at it.

And virtue ethics theories deal with wider questions – “How should I live?” and “What is a good life?” and “What are proper family, social and moral values?” All questions that we have asked, and likely will continue to ask, of ourselves. Let us never forget that there is no end to being a Freemason, it is a process, and it was designed to be a process. It is a progressive science in the perpetual improvement of the human condition.

How does Masonry answer those questions?

In the second line of the opening charge, we find, “***Knowledge is attained by degrees.***” Unfortunately, for decades (at least in Kentucky), when you receive the third degree of Freemasonry you are told you have all the knowledge you will ever need. And that’s where most Masonic education ends. If you truly want to learn more you are on your own.

The third line of the charge states, “***Wisdom dwells with contemplation.***” Think of that. **WISDOM** comes from quiet reflection. **QUIET** your mind. Contemplate, reflect, and think.

If you want to take control of your own life, you must train yourself to become **Proactive**, not **Reactive**.

Take an intentional pause. Think about that sentence - “Wisdom dwells ...with contemplation.” A few years ago my Lodge re-introduced the chamber of reflection to be incorporated into each degree. We also re-introduced the moment of reflection in the meeting itself.

Years ago a high-tech software executive created the theory that our modern society is locked in a “continuous partial attention” cycle. We are paying partial attention to multiple things constantly in order to anticipate the next thing to occupy us. As a result we are almost always mentally exhausted and may not even know it.

This WILL affect your health, your job and your relationships.

If you do not purposefully pause, and dwell in contemplation, you will struggle in your pursuit of becoming a better man. The single most fundamental aspect of Masonic intentions will be lost.

Learning to pause, even if just for a few moments, is one of the easiest and most profound habits to build into your life.

The fourth line of the opening charge includes the phrase, ***“there we must seek her.”*** We are told in the first four lines of the opening charge **WHY** we are here. We are in Lodge to seek knowledge; we are in Lodge to seek wisdom.

It is asking us to ***THINK*** very carefully about what we are about to do.

The charge continues on, ***“Let us then Brethren APPLY OURSELVES with becoming ZEAL to the practice of the excellent principles inculcated by our order.”***

Think about how many excellent principles we have in Masonry. How many lessons are there to be learned and applied with zeal?

“Let us ever remember that the great objects of our association are: the restraint of improper desires and passions (whatever they may be), the cultivation of an active benevolence and the promotion of a correct knowledge

The cultivation of an active benevolence means being NICE, kind, and well-meaning. Notice that word “cultivation,” in this case, refers to the PROCESS of trying to acquire a quality. Once again, we are being asked to actively work at being a kind and gentle, generous person.

The charge is a call to the promotion of a CORRECT knowledge of the duties we owe to GOD, our neighbor, our country and ourselves.

“Let us be united, and practice with diligence the tenets of our order.” What are tenets? A tenet is a principle or belief, especially one of the main principles of a religion or philosophy.

The tenets of Freemasonry are Brotherly Love, Relief and Truth. Relief does not necessarily mean FINANCIAL relief. We will talk more about what Masonic charity actually is in a few moments.

Brotherly Love also does not mean only to love other Masonic Brothers. We are to regard the whole human species as one family. We are being charged to aid and protect one another. For ALL men of every race, creed, country, sect, and opinion, Freemasonry provides a platform for friendship among those who might otherwise remain at a constant and perpetual distance.

In the 1808 Grand Lodge of Kentucky Constitution “Illustrations of Masonry” it devotes nearly two pages to what charity means.

A partial excerpt:

“To relieve the distressed is a duty incumbent on all men but particularly on Masons, who are linked together by an indissoluble chain of sincere affection. To soothe the unhappy, to

sympathize with their misfortunes, to compassionate their miseries, and to restore peace to their troubled minds, is the grand aim we have in view. On this basis we form our friendships, and establish our connections. Charity is the chief of every social virtue, and the distinguishing characteristic of Masons. This version includes a supreme degree of love to the great Creator and Governor of the universe, and an unlimited affection to the beings of his creation, of all characters and of every denomination. This last duty is forcibly inculcated by the example of the deity himself, who liberally dispenses his beneficence to unnumbered worlds.”

It continues a page later with, “Possessed of this amiable, this God-like disposition, Masons are shocked at misery under every form and appearance. When we behold an object pining under the miseries of a distressed body or mind, the healing accents which flow from the tongue, mitigate the pain of the unhappy sufferer, and make even adversity, in its dismal state, look gay. When our pity is excited, we assuage grief, and cheerfully relieve distress. If a Brother be in want, every heart is moved; when he is hungry, we feed him, when he is naked, we clothe him; when he is in trouble, we fly to his relief. Thus we confirm the propriety of the title we bear, and convince the world at large, that BROTHER among Masons is something more than a name. “

Those two pages written in 1808 are dedicated to benevolence to our fellow man and mention nothing of financial contributions to any charitable cause or fundraising effort of any kind, which is the 2020 version of Freemasonry in many jurisdictions.

RELIEF: To soothe the unhappy, to sympathize with their misfortunes, to be compassionate, once again to restore peace to troubled minds; this is the basis upon which we are Brothers.

And Truth. We should all know what truth is. Truth is the complete absence of deceit in thought, word and deed.

“Let all private animosities, if any unhappily exist, give place to affection and brotherly love.”

I don’t think I need to explain that. But I have attended trials for un-Masonic conduct over hotdogs and bake sales and who left the lights on. We as Masons are required to be exceptional. If we allow private animosity to reign, we are the farthest thing from exceptional. We are petty and small. As Masons, we are above such trivial matters.

It is repeated over and over in every degree that we as Masons should be well above the mundane effects of everyday life. This includes private piques and quarrels that, quite frankly, should be beneath us.

That thought is stated clearly in the next lines.

“It is a useless parade to talk of the subjection of irregular passions within the walls of this Lodge if we permit them to triumph in our interaction with each other.”

If we allow petty disagreements to define and separate us, we have closed our minds; and that flies directly into the face of what Freemasonry is meant to be.

SUBJECTION – the subjection of irregular passions, in this case, means conquest, to subdue, to vanquish or to overpower.

We are warned about irregular passions. IRREGULAR is a word used a lot by Masons when describing something we do not recognize – something that is contrary to our rules or to that which is normal or established.

Passions are strong and sometimes barely controllable emotions.

If we as Masons allow our unchecked emotions to get the best of us – especially in LODGE – it is USELESS to talk about subduing our passions, or anything else for that matter. We have missed the whole point of self-improvement using the gift of Freemasonry.

“Uniting in the Grand Design.” The Grand Design is not your Grand Lodge. It is not the Grand Lodge officers. It is not your Grand Lodge Code or Constitution or by-laws.

To UNITE in the GRAND DESIGN refers to the grand design as designated by the Great Architect of the Universe. Consult your book of faith. THAT is the grand design.

“Let us be happy ourselves and endeavor to promote the happiness of others. Let us IMPROVE in everything that is good, amiable and useful. Let the good of the Order preside over our assembly and under her intentions.” This is charging us, as brothers, to IMPROVE in all things, and let the Good of the Order preside. ***“Let us act with POISE, DIGNITY and as GENTLEMEN in our labors to become better men.”*** We are being charged (challenged) to BE BETTER MEN, even before our meeting starts.

I am not certain how many jurisdictions have an opening charge, the most recent data I could find as I mentioned was several years old. I do know that jurisdictions have abandoned lectures and charges in the interest of speed. It seems most often when something is no longer offered by individual Lodges, it is because the man who knew the lecture passed away and the lecture dies with him; or there is the ever popular excuse “we’ve never done it that way.”

Or perhaps worst of all, it is simply deemed un-necessary. If our Grand Lodge doesn’t require it, we don’t have to do it. RIGHT?

The Closing Charge, just like the Opening Charge is a challenge to us as Masons. It asks us to leave the Lodge with something on our minds.

It repeatedly reminds us to REMEMBER always that we are Masons. It begins with:

“Brothers we are about to quit this SACRED RETREAT.” How many of us have ever considered our Lodges to be sacred retreats? I have felt that at times, especially after experiencing a meeting or event that provides a quality experience, whether it be education, or a presentation on a topic about which you are passionate, or exceptional degree work, or even Masonic fellowship. You feel energized afterwards. That is when your Lodge has become a sacred retreat from the world.

“A sacred retreat of friendship and virtue.” There’s that word again – Virtue.

“And mix again with the world. Among its many concerns and employments FORGET NOT the DUTIES so frequently heard inculcated and forcibly recommended in this Lodge.”

Remember that you are Freemasons ALL the time, not just while you are in Lodge. You as a Mason ALSO represent ALL of the rest of us, ALL of the time.

“Be diligent, prudent, temperate and discreet.” These words are actually explained in the charge later.

“Remember that at this altar, you promised to befriend and relieve every brother who shall need your assistance. Remember that you promised to remind him in the most tender manner, of his failings. And aid in his reformation.”

This is a command to remember your obligation to one another, to help, aid and assist. To offer wise council, compassion, understanding and brotherly love in overcoming those irregular passions and perhaps helping another Brother overcome his.

“Vindicate his character when wrongfully traduced, suggest on his behalf the most candid and favorable circumstances. Is he justly reprehended?”

We have to hold each other and ourselves accountable to live the obligation that we, as Masons, have taken. I have seen FAR too many unfortunate situations that were ignored in the interest of peace and harmony in the Lodge rather than correct a wrong.

“Let the world observe how Masons love one another.”

At this point in this small, but powerful, charge, it actually outlines what we are to do as Masons upon leaving the Lodge.

It continues with, ***“These generous principles are to extend further- EVERY HUMAN BEING has a claim to your kind offices.”***

That phrase has never been more meaningful than it is right now. ***“Do Good unto ALL, recommend it more especially unto the household of the faithful.”***

Maintain your faith, and encourage others to maintain theirs.

What is the best way to “Let the World Observe?” It offers this, and I will repeat that charge:

Let the world observe: ***“By the diligence in the duties of your respective callings.”*** Diligence is steady perseverance; persistent exertion of body or mind to accomplish a task. Be diligent in whatever it is you are doing. Be the very best you can be.

Let the world observe: ***“By liberal benevolence and diffusive charity.”*** We talked about Masonic charity earlier; benevolence is characterized by the expression of goodwill in all things. Be KIND. Be forgiving, tolerant, patient, compassionate and understanding.

Let the world observe: ***“By the constancy and fidelity of your friendships.”*** We all should know what being a good friend and Brother means. When you offer wise council to a Brother, if he takes your advice you have likely strengthened that bond, if he doesn't take your advice, DO NOT be disheartened, for you have improved yourself in the process.

With all of these observations, the next line is:

“May you soon discover the many beneficial and happy effects of our ancient and honorable institution.”

Here the Closing Charge is explaining that these are the minimum things we must do to discover those benefits of being a Mason.

It continues, ***“And let it not be said that we have labored here in vain and spent our strength for naught. For our true work is with the Lord, and our recompense with God.”***

Again, that is self-explanatory. We all should understand what our true work is.

It ends with this, ***“Finally Brothers, be ye all of one mind- live in peace- and may the God of love and peace delight to dwell with, and bless you.”***

This is essentially a blessing on each of us as we depart, as friends, as confidants, and most importantly, as Brothers in this Fraternity.

So there you have it – a guide on how to act IN Lodge as well as OUT of Lodge, outlined quite clearly.

Why do I think this is important?

The first time I delivered the closing charge while visiting a Lodge I was asked afterwards if I wrote it. When I explained I had not, I was asked where I found it. This was not asked by a young Mason. He said in 40 years he’d never heard that. I continue to hear this same comment each time I deliver it. There is usually at least one man in the room that has never heard of either one, in spite of the fact that they are both in our approved monitorial book authorized by the Grand Lodge of Kentucky for ritual.

In just one of the four approved books, both ritual and monitorial, I have found five lectures that no one has heard for 100 years, or more, if ever. That’s a real shame.

Brothers I would strongly encourage each of you to examine your jurisdiction’s approved books of ritual and find those lectures and charges that you have never heard in your Lodge and bring them back. By committing yourselves to continuously learning in Freemasonry, you may encourage others to do the same as one of our most basic purposes for becoming Brothers in the first place.

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