



The Grand Lodge of Ancient, Free and Accepted Masons of Virginia



Committee on Masonic Education

Lodge Presentation Program Paper

Our Charge to be Freemasons

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It may appear to some that the “charges” are a minor addition appended at the end of the ritual and drama of each of the degrees, but this is not the case. These charges have particular importance and serve to relate the broad philosophical, historical, and traditional teachings of the degree to our own lives and times.

To begin to understand their importance, it is useful to reflect that the word “charge” has a number of meanings. One definition is to give instructions to a person. A second is to give a task to a person. A third is to be responsible for something, and a fourth deals with trust or safekeeping.

The “charges” apply to all Masons, from the Entered Apprentice, to the Fellowcraft, to the Master Mason from the perspective of each of these meanings. When we give the “charge” at the end of each degree, we are, in fact, providing instructions to the new Mason. We are giving him certain

tasks and making him responsible for certain things, and we are trusting him to live up to the standards, and to safeguard the principles, we have articulated in the degree.

To live as close to a pure Masonic life as we can, it is useful to do more than simply listen to the “charges” during a degree. Rather, at regular intervals, we should refresh our minds by reviewing the instructions they contain, so we might more successfully act in accordance with the values they teach.

When an initiate enters the Lodge for the first time, he is taught three great duties to which he must always adhere: the first duty is to his God, the Supreme Architect of the Universe; the second duty is to his neighbor; and the last is to himself.

He must believe in the Supreme Being, never mentioning His Name without that due respect and reverential awe which is due to his Creator. He is to believe and act with a pure heart, remembering that the Supreme Architect of the Universe is the giver of all good graces to all mankind.

The initiate should never treat his neighbor other than how he would want his neighbor to treat him: that is with respect, honor, and dignity, always acting upon the square. Beyond the moral imperative contained in the Golden Rule, failure to adhere to this principle reflects on our Masonic character. In your community and among your circle of acquaintances, bad behavior not only diminishes your own reputation, it also tarnishes the reputation of the Fraternity as well. Instead of being a role model in your community and a person others would want to emulate, they will judge that

value of Freemasonry has detracted rather than added to your character and they would hardly want to join our Craft.

Last, but not least, is the duty that you owe to yourself. If you do not live uprightly and continue to grow morally and spiritually, you fail in this duty. Rather than becoming better than you are now, which is the goal of Freemasonry – making good men better – you will fail to realize the potential given to you by the Great Architect of the Universe.

In the Fellowcraft “charge,” you are to improve your education and increase in knowledge. This “charge” is, in a sense, a code of conduct which requires you to stay within the realm of the rules and regulations of the Fellowcraft Degree. You are told that your behavior and deportment thus far have earned the honor which now has been conferred on you, and in this new character, you are required to conform to the principles of the Order by always persevering in the practice of every virtue.

Thus, it is to be understood that improving in knowledge encompasses not just the skills needed to earn a living, but includes the social skills and the practice of moral character as well. Again, therefore, the “charge” not only defines the strengthened bonds, ties, and duties toward your Brethren, but makes the point that the true test of a Mason goes beyond his behavior as a Mason within the Lodge, to include his conduct in the community.

When at last, you receive the “charge” at the end of the third degree, you recall it focuses very clearly on the character expected of a Master Mason – which after all, in many ways defines the essence of Freemasonry

and projects a proper image of the Fraternity to the community and to the world.

It would take more time than is available for this talk to detail the full meaning of Masonic character. It is clear, however, that in the eyes of the community, Masonic character will be defined by your behavior and demeanor, rather than by the high sounding words and principles in our literature. Very often, evidence of Masonic character is dependent more on the little things: a caring word, a kindness extended, or a small favor, than on some grand gesture.

The absence of Masonic character is equally noticeable, for example, when in Lodge there is a lack of courtesy among the Brethren, back biting, and unseemly arguments. The result of such behavior harms the Lodge, which then often experiences diminished enthusiasm, poor ritual, poor attendance, and reduced participation. Such deficient deportment in Lodge, which is supposed to be where we exhibit the gold standard of our behavior, is often evidenced in equally questionable conduct outside the Lodge, which taints the image of our Fraternity.

It is to avoid these situations from ever occurring that we need to review the "charge" to the new Master Mason that "the Ancient Landmarks of the Order, entrusted to your care must always be preserved and never suffer them to be infringed, or countenance a deviation from the established usages and customs of our great Fraternity."

We also are told to never let any motive make us swerve from our duty, or violate our vows, or betray our trust. Thus, in the unfortunate circumstance when these situations do arise, it is up to us "in the character

of a Master Mason,” to set an example by demonstrating leadership, and deciding to engage, and, thus, by acting quickly restore peace and harmony in the Lodge.

I would conclude this talk by restating the proposition that there is value in setting aside a time of quiet reflection when we can revisit the “charges” of the degrees and consider what it means to be a Master Mason. First, we should remember the obligation we have to our newer Masons to set an example and to help to mold their Masonic characters. Second, we should also remember the obligation to render ourselves deserving of the honor that was conferred and merit the confidence, which was reposed in us when we were raised to the Sublime Degree of Master Mason.