

THE REPUTATION OF THE FRATERNITY

“To preserve the reputation of the Fraternity unsullied must be your constant care.”

Every Master Mason is charged with that great duty.

Obviously it means the reputation of the Fraternity before the non-Masonic world. That reputation is one of the greatest assets of Freemasonry; indeed, only by our reputation do we live and grow, since Masons are forbidden to proselyte. No real Mason ever asks a profane to join the Order; the man must seek the Light; not the Light seeking the man.

The reputation of Masonry in the world is that of an Order in which men bind themselves to secrecy; practice charity and brotherhood; do good without self advertising; choose wisely among our petitioners; work a gentle influence upon themselves and their fellows towards right conduct, clean thinking and fine citizenship.

Freemasonry has certain contacts with the public; for instance, her Masonic Homes are public in the sense that they stand as monuments to Masonic Charity for all the world to see. The world at large observes us in funeral processions, burying our dead with reverence, honor and ceremonies strange to profane eyes. It watches our Grand Lodges lay the corner stones of public buildings, pouring the ancient sacrifices of corn, wine and oil; dedicating and consecrating (if it is a church) the building to its uses. It sees us occasionally attend Divine services in a body. It can obtain beautiful books about Freemasonry, from which it can learn of the fundamental principles which underlie the Order.

But “the secrets of Freemasonry are safely lodged in the repository of faithful breasts.”

Some Masons consider certain matters as “secrets” which are not so, in fact, even though they are not the subject of common talk or vain boast. It is no “secret” that Freemasonry teaches and inculcates, in so far as her power lies, those principles of law, order, morals, citizenship, fear and love of God which make for the highest type of manhood.

The non-secret teachings of the three degrees are briefly as follows:

In the Entered Apprentice Degree the initiate is taught the necessity of a belief in God; of charity towards all mankind, and especially a brother Mason; of secrecy; of the meaning of brotherly love; the reasons for relief; the greatness of truth; the advantages of temperance; the value of fortitude; the part played in Masonic life by prudence and the equality of strict justice.

He is charged to inculcate the three great duties; to be reverent before God, to pray to Him for help, to venerate Him as the source of all that is good. He is exhorted to practice the Golden Rule and to avoid excesses of all kinds. He is admonished to be quiet and peaceable, not to countenance disloyalty and rebellion, to be true and just to government and country and to be cheerful under its laws. He is charged to come often to lodge but not to neglect his business, not to argue about

Freemasonry with the ignorant but to learn Masonry from Masons, and once again, to be secret. Finally he is urged to present only such candidates as he is sure will agree to all that he has agreed to.

In the Fellowcraft Degree he argues that he will be secret regarding that which must be kept secret; that he will obey the by-laws of his own lodge; and the laws, rules, regulations and edicts of his Grand Lodge; to answer proper summons; is again reminded of his duty as a Mason in charity and relief. He agrees that a good Mason is an honest and upright man. He is taught the importance of the seventh day and the advantages of learning in general are placed before him, with especial reference to the science of geometry. Emphasis is again placed upon a reverent attitude before Deity.

Then he is charged with the need for balanced judgment; is exhorted to study the seven liberal arts and is shown that geometry is not only a mathematical and Masonic science, but also a moral one. Regular behavior is impressed upon him, as well as “the practice of all commendable virtues.”

In the Master Mason Degree all that has gone before is again emphasized, and many additional duties and responsibilities are laid upon the initiate. Science, secrecy, fidelity to trust, courage, resignation and sacrifice are taught in the great drama. His obligations are extended; his brotherly relations with his fellows are more clearly and strictly defined. He is taught the need for willing service; that prayer is not only for the petitioner; that he must be worthy of confidence; that his strength is not only for himself but for his falling brother; that wisdom is not only for the possessor but should be shared; that a brother has the right to know of approaching disaster.

He is charged to set a good example; to guard others, as well as himself from a breach of fidelity; he must preserve the ancient Landmarks and he must not countenance any changes in our established customs. Secrecy is again emphasized; the dignity of the character of a Master Mason is to be upheld; the faith and confidence of his fellows is put before him as the reward for fidelity and faith.

Reducing these great teachings to the least possible number of words and avoiding duplications produces the following list of those matters which a Mason is taught, and to which he promises, either actually or by implication, complete agreement. On these rest the reputation of the Fraternity.

Belief in God

Charity

Secrecy

Brotherly Love

Relief

Truth

Temperance

Fortitude

Prudence

Justice

Reverence

Prayer

Veneration

Golden Rule

Peaceableness

Good Citizenship

Obedience to Masonic Authority

Honesty

Observance of the Sabbath

Education

Judgment

Fidelity to Trust

Courage

Resignation

Self Sacrifice

Service to Others

Trustworthiness to Confidence

Sharing Strength and Wisdom

Setting a Good Example

Preservation of the Ancient Landmarks

Faith

Dignity

If “every” Freemason lived up to “all” these teachings, what an Utopia the world would be!

But what is remarkable is not how many Masons fail, but how many succeed! That they do succeed is evidenced by the reputation of the Fraternity in Non-Masonic circles. Were Masons as a class false to their teachings, lax in their conduct, forsworn as to their obligations; Freemasonry would not possess the fair reputation she has:

“Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart and with all thy soul and with every mind. This is the first and great commandment. And the second is like unto it, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

If the Man of Galilee was content to reduce “all the law” to fifty- three words, surely Freemasonry might formulate an equally short statement of her aims and purposes. But while “all the law” may be put into a few words, many thousand words of New Testament are needed to explain the teachings of Christianity.

Men learn by repetition. They absorb that which is told to them, and retold, and told once more. Freemasonry but follows the ancient manner of teaching when she iterates and reiterates the duties of a Mason towards his God, his neighbor and himself. But because Freemasonry teaches by repetition, her detailed reiteration makes possible many ways in which a Mason may offend. If he does not actively break a rule, he may fail as a Mason merely by a negative attitude. To fail to do good is not necessarily to do evil, but neither is a failure to work mischief necessarily a doing of good works! It is expected of men that they will fail, otherwise they are not men, but Gods! If no man ever failed, Freemasonry would be unnecessary. When a building is completed, the workmen depart. When the House Not Made With Hands is perfectly erected, the Craft is no more use.

It is one thing to fail in any Masonic duty; it is another to fail so publicly that the reputation of the Fraternity is hurt - that reputation of which we are taught that its preservation is of vital importance. Occasionally, more's the pity, it is necessary for a Masonic organization to take practical steps in regard to some brother who has failed to live up to the Masonic teachings. Masons are only men who have solemnly agreed to do certain things; sometimes they are forsworn. Sometimes our committees do not do their work aright and we are given cracked stones to work upon. Sometimes a good man changes as he grows older, and even the sweet and gentle influence of the Craft cannot hold him in the straight and narrow way.

The lodge in which someone holds membership may well be advised to do little rather than much. There are times when something must be done; when the reputation of which we think so much is hurt by failure to do. Then we have all the misery and pain of a Masonic trial; the sad washing of dirty linen in the lodge; the grief of seeing our good and great Order dragged to some extent into public notice; when ever a Mason receives the worst Masonic penalty - expulsion, or Masonic death - the world at large usually hears of it.

Few are the Masons who have no friends! Hence a Masonic trial is very apt to create tense feelings in a lodge, if not worse, and the harmony which is “the strength and support of all well regulated institutions” is made into a discord.

However, it cannot always be helped! - “But in a great many cases it can be helped!”

It is human to want to “get even.” Our brother wrongs us; it is only natural to wish him taken before the bar of lodge opinion, and, perhaps, punish him for his infraction of his obligation. Brethren often see no further than the immediate present; the immediate wrong doing; the immediate lodge trial and its results. A word of wise caution may make him look further. No man, unless suffering wrong of the most grievous character, but may be caused to stop and think by reminding him of the many obligations and duties he assumed when he, too, became a Mason. Let all such be asked, gently, kindly, considerately but pointedly - “will this action you propose benefit you as much as it will injure the lodge and the Fraternity? Will the results, inevitably to some extent public, do more harm to that reputation which we cherish than they will good to you? Is it not possible that our erring brother may be brought to make amends by less drastic means than the sad lodge trial?”

Let no brother retort “but it should not become public!” Agreed, a lodge trial should never be a public matter. But while we hold our own Mystic Tie, and the cord of secrecy is tight about our lips, we do not hold relations and friends in the same manner. John Smith is tried and suspended, perhaps expelled. He no longer goes to lodge. People want to know why. In self defense he says what he can - but what can he say? Inevitably the result of the trial becomes public. Then we suffer.

At times it is necessary to stand pain to get rid of a cancer. But the best surgeon does not use a knife until all other means fail. That lodge, that Master and those brethren who seek to compose differences, win the erring back to the path their feet should never have left, do a real service to their lodge, to their offended brother, to their erring brother and to the Fraternity whose reputation “should be our constant care.”

To whisper good counsel in the ear of an erring brother is sound Masonic teaching. To prevent tarnishing the reputation of the Fraternity we must not only endeavor to live up to the high level of our teachings, but strive to help our brethren do likewise. The best way, the brotherly way, the way of Freemasonry is by kindly caution, the friendly word of admonition, the hand stretched out to assist and save the worthy falling brother.

Only when these fail - and never then until after thinking first of the Order, next of the lodge and last of self - should we go to the court of last resort, prefer charges, have a trial and do ourselves the injury which comes always from the knife of publicity in the body of our Ancient Craft.

Freemasonry - so we truly believe - is one of God’s bright tools for shaping of the rough ashlar which we are.

“LET US STRIVE TO KEEP IT BRIGHT!”