

THE LESSON TAUGHT BY THE THREE GREAT LIGHTS

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The three chief symbols of the ancient Fraternity Masons, were the Holy Bible, Square and Compass. In the medieval lodge they were always to be found on the Master's table, and were termed the "three great lights". The old Lectures declare that the Bible was given to the Craft to rule and govern their faith; the Square, to square their actions; the Compass, to keep them within bounds with all men, particularly with a brother.

Thus, in these symbols, still preserved and revered by the Fraternity of the present day, as the furniture of the lodge, we recognize the identical ideas which constitute the basis of modern masonry.

In the center of this group of symbols is placed the Square, (Norma, the law) "to square our actions," - that is to say, the Moral Law.

Self-consciousness and freedom of the mind, are the special prerogatives which belong to man alone, of all created beings. All the rest of nature obeys eternal immutable laws; but the will of man belongs to a different sphere, in which the ideas of cause and effect, as found in the material world, are of no authority. Man is subject only to those laws which he gives himself.

What use then should man make of this privileged autonomy of self-government, that he may prove worthy of this high prerogative? What principle should govern his actions? By what square should he construct those laws which he gives himself?

There can be but one simple answer to these questions, namely: "so to act, that the principle of his actions may be exalted to a law of nature; to act in that manner only in which he thinks that He who has given to nature its immutable laws, would have compelled him to act, had He chosen to introduce compulsion into the realm of mind, in order to realize his design."

This principle of the moral law gains dignity and sanctity, through the idea of the Deity, symbolized by the Bible in conjunction with the Square.

Were Nature but the aggregate of accidental and transitory phenomena, without internal organism, it would be immaterial whether man, as a free being, sought to act in harmony with it, or whether, as might suit his pleasure or caprice, he forcibly encroached upon this, to him, strange world of phenomena.

But beneath all the diversity of this world of phenomena, there lies a unity, - beneath the changing, an unchangeable, - beneath the whole, an eternal order, - the Absolute, the Deity, - before whom our views and contemplations of time and space, are as nothing.

When we elevate ourselves to this idea, and under its influence apply the Square, we then

assume the character of free-will co-laborers on the building of the moral system of the world, and therefore, the moral law is necessarily a holy law, and requires for its maintenance no mean incentive, no fear of punishment, nay, not even the hope of a reward. He who suffers himself to be influenced by these selfish motives divests himself of the dignity of a free man, and falls to the level of a miserable slave or venal mercenary, when he should be a master of himself, doing good for the sake of doing good alone, and therein finding a sufficient reward.

The individual having adopted these ideas, and beholding by his aide a multitude of beings, formed and endowed as himself, must recognize in them co laborers on the moral system of the world; it must be evident to him that the realm of mind, like that of the material world, is also a great organic whole, to which he stands in the relation of an individual member merely. If then he would remain faithful to his principles, and truly honor the Square, he must act in reciprocity with these, his fellows and equals, and not only not impede them in their designs, (here we have the idea of justice) but also make their designs his own, (the idea of love,) and thus, he finally attains to the idea of humanity, as a superior unity, his relation to which is symbolized by the Compass the instrument with which the architect describes the circles on his plan and defines the relations existing between the separate parts and the whole.

Our "three great Lights" thus point us to the idea of the individual man as a free-will subject of the moral law, ennobled through the idea of the Deity, and reminded of his destiny by the idea of universal humanity.

It is evident from the explanation given in the ancient ritual, that the Bible is not here meant to be the source of a positive religious creed, for like the Square and Compass, it is explicitly alluded to as signifying something else, and indeed it signifies a great light that beams on Masonry, that is to say, an idea, the knowledge of which is necessary to us, if we would act with justice, and that idea is the idea of the Deity.

It follows, therefore, that the Fraternity may not question the individual as to his idea of the Deity, for it neither uses violence towards conscience, nor tolerates hypocrisy; the religious belief of the individual is left to himself as a private matter, which he must settle with his own faith and powers of comprehension.

We sometimes find the opinion expressed that only the professors of a certain religious creed are fit to be Freemasons, but this is directly at variance with the pure doctrine of Masonry. It is certainly true that the practical portion of the Christian doctrine, the universal love of man, first taught by Christ, is also the essence of Masonry, and thus we might indeed say, that he who does not acknowledge this doctrine cannot be a Mason; but this would simply be tautology and mean nothing more, but that he who does not comprehend the foundation of Masonry cannot co-operate in its building.

But what right have we to go farther and say, that he who is not outwardly accepted into the community of Christians or who does not believe in the truth of all the historical and speculative tenets taught by the church, can be no brother of ours, even though he has

adopted the practical portion of the Christian doctrine and actually lives up to it?

Dare we say that he is not worthy of our brotherly love? Would not this be falsification a mutilation of the practical Christian doctrine itself? - Would we not thus substitute in the place of that universal mankind which we are to love, a posthumous picture of a new chosen people? In what else then consists the progress of Judaism to Christianity, if not in the fact that it had torn down every barrier, every obstacle to the love of our neighbor, that it has opened our hearts to all?

In what then would consist the superiority of Christianity over Judaism, if it had merely changed the form, or altered the position of those barriers, but left them barriers still?

Or, can we say that he who does not outwardly acknowledge Christ, the Messiah, is not fit for that universal love taught by him?

Is this practical Christianity then, something that is of value or authority, merely because at some time or in some place, it was invented or devised, and that consequently he only can receive who acknowledges the supremacy and peculiar vocation of Him who first uttered it?

Is its truth dependent upon the legitimacy of its first teacher, dependent on the truth of any one historical fact and the belief in that fact?

Is man, then, indeed merely a wild plant, which though guarded with tenderness and care, can mature no worthy fruit, unless a worthier scion be engrafted on it?

No, my brethren, the Christian moral law and the law of Masonry is no invention, it is but the discovery of a truth as old as man himself. It was written on the heart of the first man, though man indeed only learned to read it in the course of time. It may be compared to an ancient faded palimpsest, which some ignorant monk has used as parchment on which to transcribe his legends, and which some future fortunate inquirer has successfully restored and deciphered.

To say that he who does not believe in the historical Christ cannot adopt his doctrine, and is unfit to practice it, is to say as much, as that he who believes not in Johannes Guttenberg can never read a book!

Or that he who believes not in Christopher Columbus cannot believe in the existence of America!

Or that he who believes not in Pythagoras can never perceive that the square described on the hypotenuse of a right-angled triangle is equivalent to the sum of the squares described on the two other sides!

Or that he who does not believe in the ancient building corporations and is no architect, can never be a Freemason!

These views are confirmed by two ancient documents of our Fraternity. In the so-called Constitutions of York, the third charge ordains that "You shall be friendly toward all men, and so far as you can, preserve true friendship with them, and not hinder them because they are of a different religion or opinion." And the fourth charge runs thus: "In particular you must be ever faithful to one another, instruct and aid each other in the art, and also do among you as you would that others should do unto you. Should a brother offend, or otherwise do wrong, all must aid him to make good his fault, until he has amended."

In the so-called Examination of a Mason under Henry VI.; among the "Arts of Masonry" is mentioned "the skill of becoming good and perfect, without the help of fear and hope."

Thus, these ancient Masons taught and practiced a nobler art, a purer morality than that which was taught and practiced in the Eleusinian Mysteries, of which Sophocles could only say: "O, thrice happy he, who beholds this consecration, he goeth down comforted into the lower world. Such only are permitted to dwell there, for all others only horrors wait!"

These facts should convince us that we have no reason to be ashamed of our actual ancestors in the culture of humanity and as teachers in the art of life, that we lose none of our internal worth by relinquishing our claims of being inheritors of Egyptian and Eleusinian Mysteries, or of numbering among our ancestors the builders of the Solomonian Temple.

In conclusion, we will cite one passage more, from the Examination, before alluded to, which in its very simplicity will speak more forcibly to our hearts than any flow of rhetorical eloquence that could be employed:

"Q. Do Masons love each other mightily as hath been said?

A. Yea verily, and it may not otherwise be; for good men and true, knowing each other to be such, do always love the more as they be more good."

POTS

Masonry is one of the most sublime and perfect institutions that ever was formed for the advancement of happiness and general good of mankind; creating, in all its varieties, universal benevolence and brotherly love. It holds out allurements so captivating as to inspire the Brotherhood with emulation to deeds of glory, such as must command, throughout the world, veneration and applause, and such as must entitle those who perform them to dignity and respect. It teaches us those useful, wise and instructive doctrines upon which alone true happiness is founded; and at the same time affords those easy paths by which we attain the rewards of virtue; it teaches us the duties which we owe to our neighbour, never to injure him in any one situation, but to conduct ourselves with justice and impartiality; it bids us not to divulge the mystery to the public, and it

orders us to be true to our trust, and above all meanness and dissimulation, and in all our vocations to perform religiously that which we ought to do
- DUKE OF SUSSEX.