

What does it mean to be a Mason
a friendship night presentation
by Dan Hrinko

What does it mean to be a Mason? The answer to this comes in various forms. The most obvious response is that it allows you to be part of an ancient brotherhood. It gives you an opportunity to meet with like-minded men who share common values. Fundamental among these common values is a belief in God.

Being part of the Masonic fraternity also means you have 4 million close friends you have yet to meet.

(Tell a story about visiting a strange town, meeting Masons, and joining brotherhood)

It means being part of one of the largest charitable organizations in the world. The last I heard, Masons and their related organizations such as the Shriners, Grotto, Knights Templar, and other organizations are generating nearly \$2 million every day for charitable purposes to help improve the world around us.

We all know of many organizations that offer a sense of fraternal relationships, charitable activities, and a chance for social activities. So what separates Freemasonry from the rest of these organizations?

Freemasonry, from its very beginning has had a strong focus on values, morality, and the enlightenment of its members. This focus on teaching men to be better men has always been central to our existence rather than being a superficial or secondary activity.

Freemasonry teaches its lessons through our ritual, the use of allegory, and through symbols. Everywhere you go you will see men wearing rings, pins, or having their cars marked with the square and compass symbol most often associated with Freemasonry. Buildings in many towns bear the same symbols. But, as those of you who are members of the craft clearly understand, the symbols are more than simple objects. Each symbol as a whole and as individual components reminds us of the important lessons of morality.

Freemasonry gives us an opportunity to walk a path following in the footsteps of many great men that have preceded us including numerous United States presidents such as George Washington, Harry Truman, Andrew Jackson, both Roosevelts, Gerald Ford, and others. We also follow in the footsteps of great scientists such as Benjamin Franklin, philosophers such as Voltaire, composers such as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, and poets such as Robert Burns. It even gives us an opportunity to follow in the footsteps of the first man to walk on the moon.

At the heart of Freemasonry is the use of symbols to teach moral lessons. Symbols, in general, are simply objects or shapes that have a greater meaning attached to them. Something as simple as a circular ring worn on the left hand has tremendous meaning attached to it. It describes a relationship, a commitment, and a lifelong involvement with another person.

In Freemasonry, we use ordinary objects of the working trades such as the square, compasses, plumb, level, 24 inch rule, and other such tools to illustrate and teach moral lessons.

A builder working on a house will always have with them a square which is a tool to prove the perpendicular or 90° angle. As a builder works, he will not only measure for length but mark and test every joint with the square to assure that the perfect 90° angle will be maintained throughout construction contributing to a structure that is straight, stable, and will last for years. It is an unvarying standard by which every move that builder makes is tested.

In a moral sense, the Square of Virtue also serves as an unvarying standard by which every move and decision we make in our lives can be tested. Imagine taking every decision you make, every action, and all plans and testing each element with the Square of Virtue to assure that it is of the highest standard and quality? That clearly leads to a life that is led with few regrets and in which you can take great pride.

The compasses, or dividers as they are often called today, are simply a tool to define a circle. Those of you familiar with plane geometry can see where such an instrument has multiple uses for understanding proportion, scale, and relationships.

In Freemasonry, we use the compasses to establish a boundary beyond which we should not let our passions lead us. Imagine living a life where you are aware of your angers, frustrations, sadness, and other feelings, yet you keep them within reasonable bounds so as not to cloud judgment. This allows us to remain free from impulsiveness, rashness, or other means of thinking that could lead to regrettable actions.

The idea of using symbols to teach moral lessons is as ancient as the world. Many documents of antiquity include references of using symbols and allegory to teach lessons.

Although Freemasonry has been organized in its current form since 1717, it has clearly existed in the form of operative lodges for many centuries. One of my favorite examples of operative tradesmen using their tools for moral lessons can be

found in a simple brass square dated 1508. When building a bridge in Ireland, the builders placed a small brass square in the northeast corner of the northeast piling of this bridge on the foundation stone. Those of you who are members of the craft will clearly recognize the significance of this location. This square was completely unnoticed until the early 1800s when the bridge was being rebuilt and this particular square was discovered.

What makes it special is the fact that it is clearly not a working man's tool. First, it is too small to be of practical use on something as big as a foundation stone. Second is its location, and third is the inscription found upon the square. On one side it says "I will strive to live with love and care," and on the other side it says "upon the level by the square." This simple poem clearly illustrates that this object was meant to represent more than a simple working tool and was used as a means of teaching men to be better men.

Freemasonry has many symbols each having their own lessons. And in fact, most symbols have several lessons. Carl Claudy, a noted Masonic author of the early 20th century, stated that "poor is a symbol that has but one meaning." For example, we have all heard about the 24 inch gauge being used to divide our time. Have you ever considered it being further used as a means of reminding us to apply appropriate priorities to avoid frivolous activities and make use of the valuable resource of time on where it can be of greatest benefit?

On a personal level, Freemasonry can be a valuable experience. I have been a Freemason for XX years and continually learn from my experiences both in Lodge and with the brothers of the fraternity. In many ways, I look at the tools and symbolism of Freemasonry as "a toolkit for daily life."

Freemasons gather around the Lodge and its related activities where we promote the purpose and functions of Freemasonry. As with most organizations, there are those social activities where brothers can gather informally to enjoy fellowship, build relationships, and take joy in their common goals and knowledge.

On a more serious note, we have the formal Lodge meetings which begin with an opening. This opening ceremony has been described as a means of separating ourselves from the world at large to create a space where we focus on the essence of what it means to be a good man. We leave behind the worries of daily life, the distractions of superficial matters of the world around us, and take time to study the lessons of the craft.

Lodge meetings also involve the exemplification of our ritual which is a specialized set of experiences that provides all of us a formal review of the essential elements of Masonic teachings through the experiences of a candidate, the symbolism of the actions in ceremony, and the lessons contained within our lectures. These

ceremonies are designed to promote the development of a strong and trusting connection with like-minded men who are looking beyond the superficial. There are also times for discussion and exploration of the deeper meanings of the lessons contained within the ritual and lectures to strengthen our own individual understanding of Freemasonry, its lessons, and applications. Like any other skilled trade, merely purchasing equipment and taking a few brief lessons does not allow you to truly master the skills associated with that trade. As speculative Freemasons, we should invest the time to explore and truly understand the lessons of the ritual since a deeper exploration will make it easier for us to apply these lessons in our daily lives.

(It is helpful to find someone in the audience who is a skilled tradesman and you can ask if purchasing the tools will make you a skilled tradesman. Then ask if an hours-worth of lessons will make you a skilled tradesman. Then ask how long you would need the study with that skilled tradesman to truly understand the craft and trade to become proficient.)

As a Mason, I have benefited greatly on a personal level as well. It is allowed me to set priorities and discover what is truly important in my life. Nice cars are fine, but good friends are forever. It allows me to better understand myself, work at reducing my flaws, and provides me an opportunity to understand my place and responsibilities when interacting with those around me. It provides an opportunity to be of service to others as I apply the lessons of Freemasonry in my daily life to the benefit of not only the Lodge and my Masonic Brothers, but to the community as a whole.

Lastly, it provides me an opportunity to behave in a way in which I can take great pride because of the decisions I have made that are shaped by Masonic teachings.

Many of you are Brothers of the craft and come to celebrate our fraternity. Others are guests who have been invited to join us to learn more about what Freemasonry has to offer. You have been specifically asked to be here because the person who extended this invitation has confidence that you have the “right stuff” of being a fundamentally good man who could benefit from the lessons of Freemasonry to help you develop into being an even better man. Should you decide to become involved with our fraternity, it is important to remember that Freemasonry is an investment. You will get in return in proportion with what you invest.

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