

The Meaning of Masonry
by Albert Pike

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A Lecture

Read at the Request of the Grand Lodge of Louisiana
by Bro. Albert Pike

*The Evil Consequences of Schisms and Disputes
for Power in Masonry,
and of Jealousies and Dissensions
Between Masonic Rites*

1858

SUCH, my brethren, is the subject on which I have been requested to address you. Some who have the interests of Masonry at heart, have thought it was possible to say something upon this subject that might tend to remove erroneous impressions, to increase union and harmony among Masons, and to persuade society at large that its well-being and progress are, to some extent, involved in the advancement and prosperity of Masonry. They have demanded that I should say something; and, though unaffectedly reluctant to do it, my obligation as a Mason bars against me all the avenues of escape, and compels disinclination to yield to the imperative mandate of duty.

It would need no argument to show that to the Masonic Order itself, as to any other order or association, however unpretending and unimportant, intestine dissensions, struggles for the possession of power, jealousies and heart-burnings must necessarily be harmful, retard its growth and progress, repel those who, if it were at peace within itself, would seek to approach its doors; and at first diminish and ultimately destroy its capacity for usefulness. If this were all that I desired to establish, I might say so much and at once conclude.

But we, my brethren, do not believe that this is all. We think that the highest interests of Society, and of the community in which we live, and, perhaps, even interests wider and more general still, those of the Nation, and of humanity at

large, are affected and injured, in that which affects and does harm to Masonry. We think that the world without our Temples is deeply interested in the continuance or restoration of peace and harmony within; and that every Mason who encourages or by apathy permits dissensions within the walls that veil our mysteries from the world's eyes, is an enemy, not of Masonry only, but of that world's advancement and prosperity.

It is indeed true that the world at large, the statesmen and the men of business, are not in the habit of attaching much importance to the peaceful operations, the active efforts and silent influences of Masonry. Some even think evil of the order; to others its pretensions are the subject of mirth and food for ridicule; while probably the general impression is that it is a harmless and inoffensive association, rather laudable for its benevolent propensities, its charities, and the assistance its members mutually lend each other; but one in which the world at large is in no wise interested, one whose ceremonies are frivolous, its secrets mere pretence, its titles and dignities absurd, and its dissensions mere childish disputes for barren honours and an empty presidency, fit only to excite the pitying smiles of the grave and the sarcastic laughter of the ill-natured.

Nor is it to be denied, that there is some warrant for this, in the unfortunate proclivity of over-zealous and injudicious brethren to make the history of Masonry remount to the time when Adam, in the Garden of Eden, was Grand Master; to invent fables and manufacture traditions; to invest with a mysterious sanctity the trite commonplaces that all the world is at liberty to know; to give interpretations of symbols that every scholar knows to be untrue and every man of sense knows to be vapid and trivial; in the vain parade of sounding titles and glittering decorations; and more than all, in the angry disputes which rend the bosom of the Order, accompanied with bitter words, harsh epithets and loud denunciations, that give the lie to the combatants' claim of brotherhood, in regard to questions that to the world seem trifling and unreal.

Is society really interested in the peace and progress of Masonry? Has the world a moral right to demand that harmony shall govern in our Temples? Is that a matter which at all

concerns the community ? How grave and important are the interests that by our mad dissensions we recklessly put at hazard ? And by what means are peace and harmony to be restored and maintained ?

Such are the questions which it is demanded of me to consider. To do so, it is evidently necessary first to settle what Masonry is, and what its objects are, and by what means and appliances it proposes to effect those objects.

The well-being of every nation, like that of every individual, is threefold--physical, moral and intellectual. Neither physically, morally, or intellectually is a people ever stationary. Always it either advances or retrogrades; and, as when one climbs a hill of ice, to advance demands continual effort and exertion, while to slide downward one needs but to halt.

The happiness and prosperity of a people consist in advancing on each of the three lines, physical, moral and intellectual, at once- for the day of its downfall draws nearer, even when its intellect is more developed and the works of its genius are more illustrious, and while its physical comforts increase, if its moral progress does not keep pace with its physical and intellectual; and yet without the last, the two first do not mark the loftiest condition of a great people.

That institution deserves the title of " public benefactor," which by a system of judicious charities and mutual assistance diminishes the sum total of haggard want and destitution, and relieves the public of a portion of the burden which the necessities of the poor and shelterless impose upon it: for it thus aids the physical advancement of the people.

It still more deserves the title, if in addition, it imperatively requires of its members the strict and faithful performance of all those duties towards their fellow-men as individuals, which the loftiest and purest morality enjoins; and so is the potent auxiliary of the laws, and the enforcer of the moral precepts of the great Teacher who preached the Sermon on the Mount: for it thus labours for the moral elevation of the people.

And still more, if its initiates are also, and of necessity, devoted to the true interests of the people if they are the soldiery of Liberty, Equality and Brotherhood, and at the same time of good government, of good order, and of the laws, that made by the representatives of all, for the general good of all, must be implicitly obeyed by all: for thus again it aids in elevating still higher the moral character of the people.

And most of all, if in addition to all this, it strives to elevate the people intellectually, by teaching those who enter its portals the profoundest truths of Philosophy, and the wisdom of the Sages of every age; a rational conception of the Deity; of the universe that He has made, and of the laws that govern it; a true estimate of Man himself, of his freedom to act, of his dignity and his destiny.

I mean to speak only of what Masonry teaches; and to set up no extravagant pretensions in its behalf. That its precepts are not fully obeyed by its initiates, in no wise detracts from their value or excellence; any more than the imperfect performance of its votaries detracts from the excellence of religion. The theory and the intentions of every man that lives are better and purer than his practice-I do not say they are unfortunately so; for it is one of the great kindnesses of Providence, and a most conclusive proof of God's existence and infinite benevolence, that the worst as well as the purest of men has ever which he must perforce always struggle to reach, an ideal and exemplar of a rarer excellence than he can ever attain to, strive and struggle as he may. It has been well and truly said, that even Hypocrisy is the involuntary homage which vice pays to virtue.

The Masons who do not live up to the teachings of their Order, proves only that they are men; that, like other men, they are weak with the frailties of feeble human nature; and that in the never ceasing struggle with their passions and the mighty circumstances that environ us all, it is often their lot to be discomfited. If the doctrines of Masonry are good, they of necessity have their effect, and are never taught in vain. For not in vain are the winged seeds of Truth ever sown; and if committed to

the winds, God sees to it that they take root somewhere and grow.

To inquire what Masonry is, is not only to seek to know its history, its antecedents, and its statistics, but more and chiefly to inquire what are its morals and its philosophy. This latter is the inquiry that I have proposed to myself to answer; but as its importance to the world without depends upon the extension of the Order, the number of its members, and its permanency, I must first, and with that view alone, say a few words as to the former. If the Masonic Order were merely a thing of yesterday, ephemeral, and to pass away to-morrow; if it were local, and confined to one country or to men of one faith, or if the number of its initiates were small, and therefore its capacity for good or evil limited, it would be comparatively unimportant to inquire what were its morality and its philosophy.

It is not ephemeral or transitory. I will not claim that it was coeval with Noah or with Enoch, or that its Lodges were held within the holy walls of the first Temple at Jerusalem, or even that it arose during the times of the Crusades. It is enough to say that its origin is hidden in the mists and shadows of antiquity. The Arab builds into his rude walls the carved blocks that once were a part of Babylonian palaces, when Ezekiel prophesied, and when Daniel interpreted the dreams of Kings: the stones hewn by the Old Etruscans before Romulus slew his brother and built the first wall for Rome, may be still seen in the works of Roman architects: and so in our Rituals, attesting the antiquity of the Order, remain embedded words now obsolete, their meaning long forgotten and only recently rediscovered.

We know from historical testimony that the Order existed in England and Scotland in the seventeenth century, and was introduced into France in the year 1721, one hundred and thirty-seven years ago. As early as the year 1787, it had extended into almost every State in Europe, into the East and West Indies and Turkey; and it was estimated that there were then 3,217 Lodges, numbering at least 200,000 members. Then the United States were in their first childhood, chiefly confined to a narrow strip of country along the Atlantic coast, and there and in Canada there were estimated to be but 85 Lodges.

Now, in our thirty-one States, the District of Columbia, and our Territories there are thirty-six Grand Lodges- and in the whole nation not far from 4,200 Lodges, besides other Subordinate Bodies of all the Rites; with a membership of not less than 140,000 persons. In every Christian country on the globe our Temples are frequented; and in Turkey, India and Persia, the Mohammedan bows before the altar of Masonry. In England, France, Scotland, Ireland, Germany and Switzerland, the Order has continued to advance. Though Popes have excommunicated and the Inquisition has persecuted, Masonry yet lives in Spain, and under the shadow of the Papal throne- and when in Naples it has been unsafe to meet on land, Lodges have been held upon the open sea, in sight of the thousand lights of the city and of the pharos of Messina, with the starry heavens alone for the covering of the triangular Lodge of boats, from which up to Heaven rose the sweet incense of Masonic prayer.

The greatest, the wisest and the best of men in every country have adorned the great Order in both ancient and modern times; and united zealously in its labours. Statesmen, soldiers, advocates, scholars, poets, artists, the merchant, the mechanic, and the labourer, have for one hundred and thirty-seven years at least, " met in our Lodges upon the level, and parted on the square." PAUL JONES, LAFAYETTE and WASHINGTON were Masons: FRANKLIN sat with LANDE in the same Lodge in which HELVETIUS had worn the apron. Almost all the great marshals and generals of Napoleon, including the three kings, Joseph, Murat and Bernadotte knew the mystic numbers, and made the French and Scottish Rites illustrious. Natural Science contributed to Masonry a Lacedpede, Painting, a Horace Vernet, Music, a Meyerbeer, the Stage, Talma; the Bar Philippe Dupin, his not less illustrious elder Brother and Odilon Barrot. In other countries Masonry counted its distinguished names, too numerous to mention and at the present day, in our own, its initiates occupy the high places of the country, hold the helm of the ship of State, sit in the Departments of State, War, the Interior, and others, preside on the Bench, and represent our country at foreign courts.

In Europe it has founded public libraries, established free schools, given rewards for eminent acts of virtue and heroism, established homes for Masons poor and destitute, fed the hungry, clothed the naked, and been the friend of the oppressed and unfortunate.

In our own country, it follows in good faith the same path. It establishes schools and founds academies, and its five thousand two hundred Lodges are so many centres from which charity flows in all directions like the light, and whose exchequers are rich with the gratitude of widows, and the tearful thanks of orphans. And prominent above all, like a great light that sends its rays far across the waters, stands THE LOUISIANA RELIEF LODGE, that noblest of Masonic institutions, opening wide its doors to the sick, the destitute, the friendless stranger, and doing honour to Masonry and to the State.

With this mere glance at the history, the antecedents, the personnel and the statistics of Masonry, I must be content. It is sufficient to show that it is of some importance to this community, to the Union and the world, to know what are the morals and philosophy taught by this great, permanent and widely extended Order.

What then, is the morality of Masonry? Listen, and you shall learn. Masonry says to its initiate: "BE CONTENT. Compare not your condition with the few above you, but with the thousands with whom you would not by any means change your fortune and condition. A soldier must not think himself unprosperous, if he be not successful as Alexander or Wellington; nor any man deem himself unfortunate that he hath not the wealth of Rothschild, but rather let the former rejoice that he is not lessened like the many generals who went down, horse and man, before Napoleon; and the latter, that he is not the beggar, who in the bleak winter wind holds out his tattered hat for charity. There may be many who are richer and more fortunate; it is certain that there are many thousands who are very miserable, compared to you."

But a Mason's contentedness must by no means be a

mere contented selfishness; like him, who, comfortable himself, is indifferent to the discomfort of others. There will always be in this world wrongs to forgive, sufferings to alleviate, sorrows asking for sympathy, necessities and destitution to relieve, and ample occasion for the exercise of active charity and beneficence. And he who sits unconcerned amidst it all, perhaps enjoying his own comforts and luxuries the more, by contrasting them with the hungry and ragged misery and shivering wretchedness of his fellows, is not contented, but only unfeeling and brutal.

It is the saddest of all sights upon this earth, that of a man, lazy and luxurious, or hard and penurious, to whom want appeals in vain, and suffering cries in an unknown tongue. The man whose hasty anger hurries him into violence or crime, is not half so unworthy to live. This is the faithless steward, that embezzles what is given him in trust for the peniless and impoverished among his brethren. The true Mason must be, and must have a right to be, content with himself; and he can be so, only when he lives, not for himself alone, but for others, who need his assistance and have a claim upon his sympathy.

"Charity," says a fine old writer, "is the great channel through which God passes all his mercies upon mankind. For we receive absolution of our sins in proportion to our forgiving our brother. This is the rule of our hopes, and the measure of our desire in this world; and on the day of death and judgment, the great sentence upon mankind shall be transacted according to our alms, which is the other part of charity. God Himself is LOVE; and every degree of charity that dwells in us, is the participation of the Divine Nature."

These principles Masonry reduces to practice and by them it expects its initiates to be guided and governed. It says to them, in the words of the great Roman: "Men in no respect nearly approach to the Deity, as when they confer benefits on men. To serve and do good to as many as possible--there is nothing greater in your fortune than that you should be able, and nothing finer in your nature than that you should be desirous, to do this." It expects every man to do something, within and accord-

ing to his means; and if not alone, then by combination and association. A Lodge may aid in founding a school or an academy; and if not, it can at least educate one boy or girl the child of a poor or departed Brother. And it should never be forgotten, that in the poorest unregarded child that seems abandoned to ignorance and vice, may slumber virtue, intellect and genius and that in rescuing from the mire and giving him the means of education and development, the Lodge may confer on the world as great a benefit as was given it by John Faust, the boy of Mentz, who revealed to it the art of Printing.

For we never know the importance of the act we do. The daughter of Pharaoh little thought what she was doing for the human race, and the vast unimaginable consequences that depended on her charitable act, when she drew the little child of a Hebrew woman from among the rushes that grew along the bank of the Nile, and determined to rear it as her own. How often has an act of charity, costing the doer little, given to the world a great painter, a great sculptor, a great musician, a great inventor? How often has such an act developed the ragged boy into a benefactor of his race! For there is no law, thank God! that limits the returns that shall be reaped from a single good deed. The widow's mite may not only be as acceptable to God, but may produce as large results, as the rich, costly offering.

Masonry inculcates upon the master, care and kindness for the slave whom God has placed in his power and under his protection. It teaches to the employers of other men, in mines, manufactories and workshops, consideration and humanity for those who depend upon their labour for their bread, and to whom want of employment is starvation, and overwork is fever, consumption and death. While it teaches the employed to be honest, punctual and faithful, as well as respectful, and obedient to all proper orders, it also teaches the employers that every man or woman that desires to work, has a right to have work to do- and that these, and those who from sickness or feebleness, old age or infancy, are not able to work, have a right to be fed, clothed, and sheltered from the inclement elements- that he commits an awful sin against Masonry and in the sight of God, if he closes his workshop or fac-

tory, or ceases to work his mine, when they do not yield him what he considers sufficient profit, and so dismisses his workmen and workwomen to starve; or when he reduces their wages to so low a standard that they and their families cannot therewith be fed and clad and comfortably housed; or by over-work must give him their blood and life in exchange for the pittance of their wages; and that his duty as a Mason and a Brother peremptorily requires him to continue to employ those who else will be pinched with hunger and cold, or must resort to theft and vice and to pay them fair wages, though it may reduce or annul his profits, or even eat into his capital; for God has but LOANED him his wealth, and made him His almoner and agent to invest it.

Not only in their charities, but in every other manner, Masonry will have its initiates to be GENEROUS; not careful to return no more than they receive, but preferring that the balance upon the ledger of benefits shall be in their favour. He, it holds, who has received payment in full for all the benefits and favours that he has conferred, is like a spendthrift who has consumed his whole estate, and laments over an empty exchequer. He who requites our favours with ingratitude, adds to, instead of diminishing our wealth, and he who cannot return a favour, is equally poor, whether that inability arise from poverty of spirit and sordidness of soul or actual pecuniary need.

If he is wealthy who has large sums invested, and the mass of whose fortune consists in obligations by which other men promise to pay him money, he is still more so, to whom many owe large returns of kindnesses and favours. Beyond a moderate sum each year, the rich man merely interests his means, and that which he never uses is still, like favours unrequited and kindnesses unreciprocated a real portion of his fortune. It is the Mason's part to protect the feeble against the strong, and the defenceless against rapacity and craft; to succour and comfort the poor, and be the guardian, under God, of His innocent and helpless wards- to value friends more than riches or fame, and gratitude more than money or power; and so to be the true nobleman by God's patent, his escutcheon and quarterings to be found in Heaven's great book of Heraldry; to

be liberal, but only of that which is his own; to be generous, but only when he has first been just; to give, when it involves the deprivation of a luxury or a comfort.

"I will not acknowledge as an initiate," Masonry declares, " the man who is not disinterested and generous, not only in acts, but in his opinions of men, and his constructions of their conduct. He who is selfish and grasping, or censorious and ungenerous, will not remain within the strict limits of Honesty and Truth, but will shortly commit injustice. He who loves himself too much, must needs love others too little; and he who is inclined to harsh judgment, will not long delay to give unjust judgment, and afterwards or not at all, hear the case. The worldly, the covetous and the sensual; the man governed by inclination and not by duty; the unkind, severe, censorious or injurious in the relations or intercourse of life; the unfaithful parent or undutiful child; the cruel master or faithless servant; the treacherous friend, bad neighbour, or bitter and ungenerous competitor, may wear the white apron of the Mason, and rejoice in all the titles of the Order; but he wanders at a great distance from the true Masonic Light."

Next, Masonry required of its Initiates, FIDELITY. "Truth plighted is ever to be kept." It does not cease to repeat them, was an axiom even among Pagans. The virtuous Roman said: "Either let not that which seems expedient be base, or if it be base, let it not seem expedient." The word of a Mason, like that of a Knight in the times of Chivalry, once given, ought to be sacred; and the judgment of his Brethren, upon him who violates his pledge, should be stern as the judgments of the Roman Censors against him who violated his oath. Calamity should always be chosen rather than baseness; and we should prefer to die rather than be dishonoured. INDUSTRY and HONESTY are virtues peculiarly inculcated in Masonry. When the arrogant Stuarts sat upon the throne of England, and the Bourbons on that of France, each claiming to rule by Divine right; when Republican Government was more remote from actual life than Utopia or the New Atlantis; when Nobility thought it was born to rule, and the people to toil and serve; when Rank and Caste and Privilege looked down with lordly contempt upon the leathern apron of the artisan and the frieze jerkin of the labourer, THE GREAT ORDER wrought silently in its degree of

Apprentice, Craftsman and Master Mason or Builder- adopted for itself a democratic system of government; and for the successor of the Demi-gods and Princess of the old legends of the Mysteries, selected an humble artisan, the son of a poor widow of Tyre an industrious and honest man, cunning to work in brass and iron; and represented him as the Peer of Kings. The history of the world hardly offers a more significant and extraordinary lesson.

As the bees have no love for drones, so true Masons have none for the idle and lazy, for those who are so, are already useless, and in the way to become dissipated and vicious; and perfect honesty, which ought to be the common qualification of all, is more rarely met with than diamonds. To do earnestly and steadily, to do faithfully and honestly that which we have to do- perhaps this wants but little, when looked at from every point of view, of including the whole body of the moral law.

We think, at the age of twenty, that life is much too long for that which we have to learn and do; and that there is an almost fabulous distance between our age and that of our Grandfather. But when, at the age of sixty, if we are fortunate enough to reach it, or unfortunate enough, as the case may be, and according as we have used or wasted our time, we halt and look back along the way that we have come, and cast up and try to balance our accounts with Time, we find that we have made Life much too short, and thrown away a large portion of our days. We then in our mind deduct from the sum total of our years, the hours that we unnecessarily have spent in sleep; the waking hours each day, during which the surface of the mind's pool has not been stirred or ruffled by a single thought; the days that we have got rid of as we could, to attain some real or fancied object that lay beyond, in the way between which and us stood irksomely and intervening days; and the hours mis-spent and worse than wasted, in folly and dissipation; and we acknowledge with many a sigh, that we could have learned and done, in half a score of years well spent, more than we have learned and done in our forty years of manhood.

To learn and to do I This is the soul's work here below.
The soul grows, as truly as an oak grows. As the tree takes the