

## **THE FIRST DEGREE**

The first degree is essentially a degree or condition of purification. It is the first step the candidate must take if he would climb the mystic ladder that Jacob saw in his dream.

If we believe in evolution, and most of us do, we must recognize that the path of our evolution is along the lines of our inner unfoldment, the evolution of our latent goodness. There is a germ of goodness, of pure gold, in the breast of every human being, which by cultivation and education can be developed into light and power.

Just as the oak is in the acorn, so is the masterman in the average man of today. And as culture is necessary to develop the acorn into the oak, so is education and cultivation necessary to unfold the goodness that is latent in every man.

The three degrees in Blue Lodge Masonry exemplify the ascent of man from the unregenerate and materialistic being to a regenerate master-man--the master-builder of character and manhood. It is Jacob's ladder or the evolutionary path of man.

But for man to rise into a higher and nobler manhood, he must needs make the first step, or take the First Degree, which is that of purification. It is through purification only that man can come or grow into mastership.

To become a master-man, master over our thoughts, emotions and acts, we must cultivate the latent faculties within ourselves and overcome the base, the mean and evil within us.

That is why we are taught, first of all, to "divest ourselves of all metallic substances." The metallic substances" or base metals are the base passions, vices and degrading habits that have become part of us. If man is to be refined, to become better, he must give up, get rid of, and divest himself of his baser self, which is not his real self, but the accumulated rubbish within his temple.

Just as much as it is necessary to remove the dross in order to uncover the gold, so is it absolutely essential for man to rid himself of his dross to uncover the gold or goodness within himself.

We are also taught "not to daub with untempered mortar." Masonry abounds in symbolic emblems of the builders art to "imprint on the mind wise and serious truths" and illustrate moral and practical lessons. Just as in the construction of a temporal

building the use of "untempered mortar" would endanger its stability, so are we admonished that, in the building of our temple of manhood and character leading to a successful life, we "do not daub with untempered mortar," or base and degrading thoughts and acts. Every thought and deed enters into the construction of our manhood, like so many bricks in the construction of a structure. Then how careful we as builders or Masons should be in the construction of our manhood. Shall we choose well tempered mortar of love, kindness, forgiveness, or shall it be the selection of "untempered mortar" of hate, anger, and would pull our structure down ?

The common gavel teaches us to "divest our hearts and consciences of all the vices and superfluities of life, thereby fitting our minds as living stones, for that spiritual building, that house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." The "gavel" is our will-power, directed by our minds. It is through our will-power directed by our enlightened minds that we can free ourselves from undesirable conditions.

Man is dual, being both good and bad. There is constant struggle between the good and the bad in man. The evil in him does not give up without a struggle. If he is a slave to some passion, it takes strength of will-power and the repeated exercise of it for that man to free himself of his vice. In proportion that we exercise our will-power, our "common gavel," for good, for our upbuilding, do we further increase this will-power, obtain strength of mind and develop manhood and character. This will enable us to be successful in our chosen walk of life. Remember, therefore, that the "gavel" is your free-will, and it is a "common gavel," for it is "common" to all. Every man is endowed with this inestimable gift by God.

How careful we must be in our living, if we are to prove worthy to wear the lamb-skin or white leathern apron, as an emblem of our innocence ! "The lamb has in all ages been deemed an emblem of innocence; he, therefore, who wears the lambskin is constantly reminded of that purity of life and conduct which is so essentially necessary to his gaining admission into the Celestial Lodge above where the Supreme Architect of the universe presides." Let the white leathern apron always remind us that our lives must be blameless, spotless and free from sin and wrong-doing.

Power or force is in itself unmoral; but it becomes moral or immoral depending on the direction of its application. Our thoughts and acts are moral or immoral depending upon what uses we put them to.

Thus we see that the First Degree abounds in symbolic language which is positive in its instruction. It teaches a positive philosophy, a positive living of a life. The symbolic language in its literal sense has no meaning, and it never was intended for the craft to stop short at its literal application. Those who originated the institution of Freemasonry used this symbolic language to hide from the profane and yet reveal to the initiated profound truths and practical instruction for our rule and guide in our daily living. The lessons in this degree are eminently practical. It is practical to be good, to be free from vices and passion; for it lead to power, to health, to a long and successful life. And it is impractical to be a slave to vices, to degrading habits; for they sap our strength, our manhood, leading to disease, failure and untimely death.

Therefore we see that the First Degree is the first step a candidate should take, and that is Purification. Have you taken this first step? If not, why not?

--Bro. A. W. Witt, in the Kansas City Freemason