

Charity

By Unknown

The subject of charity, or brotherly aid, may well be illustrated by a sketch of a condition that developed itself among the Roman people many centuries ago. In essentials that condition was the same as the condition in which we now live.

In the early days of the Roman Republic a man grew up in the house in which he was born; when he married he bought his wife to live with him under the paternal roof; when he died he left his sons abiding in the same place. Neighboring families were similarly stabilized, and all these groups, owing to this perpetual neighborliness and to intermarriage, became so inwoven with each other that in a community there would not be one stranger.

In such a community the individual was not left to his own private resources; he was surrounded by others ever ready to aid him in misfortune, nurse him in illness and mourn him in death.

But, there came a time when this stability of life was broken up. By degrees the Romans conquered adjoining territory. A great military system was organized. Whole nations were brought into the Roman Empire. Great cities arose; travel was made possible; and a feverish restlessness took the place of the old stability. The old calm neighborhood life was destroyed, and in its place there grew up a fermenting life in town and city. A man no longer lived and died in the place of his birth, but moved from place to place, becoming a stranger in his own neighborhood, and scarce knew other persons living under the same roof. In misfortune and death he was thrown back on his own, unaided, individual resources.

In this situation men set out about the creating of a bond that would take the place of the lost neighborhood ties. They organized themselves into "Collegia" – groups formed of men in the same trade – which in the early days of their history were principally devoted to securing for a man a becoming burial service, the lack of which so filled a Roman with dread.

In the course of time these organizations – we could rightly call them lodges – assumed more and more functions until at last a man found in them charities, social life, business aid, religious influences, friendships and other features of general protection. To live a stranger in a city was no longer a thing to dread, to a man who could find in such a fellowship, the same friendship and support that his forefather had secured in the oldtime neighborhood. We men of today are

living under just such conditions as brought Collegia into existence. The great majority of us are living in towns and cities; many of us are subject to conditions that shuttle us about from place to place, and from situation to situation, so that life has lost its firmness and security. Our next-door neighbor is a stranger; we may live in an apartment house, where even with dwellers on the same floor we have no ties at all.

In the midst of such conditions the individual is often thrown entirely upon his own resources. It is here that the lodge comes in, for the lodge, from this present point of view, is nothing other than a substitute for the old-fashioned small community life, wherein neighbor was so tied to neighbor that there was no need of charities, social centers or employment bureaus. In a lodge a man need no longer be a stranger; he finds there other men who, like himself, are eager to establish friendships, engage in social intercourse, and pool the resources of all in behalf of the needs of each.

From all this one can see at a glance what brotherly aid really is. It is the substitution of the friend for the stranger. It is a spirit which throws round a man the comforts and securities of love. When a worthy brother in distress, or his family, is helped, it is not as a pauper, as in the fashion of public charity, but the kindly help which one neighbor is always so glad to lend to another. Masonic charity is strong, kindly, beautiful and tender; and not charity at all in the narrow sense of the word. Nay, it does not wait until a brother is in distress, but throws about him in his strength and prosperity the affectionate arm of friendship, without which life is cold and harsh. Friendship, Fraternity and Fellowship – this is the soul of Freemasonry, of which charity is but one gesture with a thousand meanings.

Freemasonry not only inculcates the principals of love and benevolence, it seeks to give them actual and living presence in all occupations and intercourse of life. It not only feels, it acts! It not only pities human suffering, it relieves it! Nowhere in the world can a good Mason feel himself alone, friendless or forsaken. The invisible but helpful arms of our Order surround him, wherever he may be.

Mythic story tells us that the ancient gods invisibly and secretly followed their favorites in all their wanderings, and when these were exposed to danger or threatened with destruction, would unveil themselves in their awful beauty and power, and stand forth to preserve them from harm, or to avenge their wrongs. So Freemasonry surrounds all her children with her preserving presence, revealing herself only in the hour of peril, sickness or distress.

It is an erroneous idea, but one widely prevalent, that Freemasonry is a benefit society; that persons join it that they may be cared for in their periods of adversity. Nothing could be further from the truth; at least theoretically one unites with our Fraternity that he may serve and minister to the needs of others.

Freemasonry is not, in itself, a charitable organization. That is, the primary purpose of the Order is not charitable relief to its members.

Masonic charity is a great fact; it is an inherent part of the Masonic system; but it is not the primary purpose or function of Freemasonry.

The fundamental creed of Masonry is and ever must be, the study of Masonic philosophy. As Freemasons come together for the discussion of Masonic truth, a strong feeling of brotherhood naturally results. The friendships formed in this work carry in themselves a desire to relieve the necessities of unfortunate brothers.

The real Masonic charity (or assistance) that is afforded by one brother to another is assistance in the learning and understanding of Masonic truth.

We are not taught that we shall afford one another political, business or social assistance. Masonic lodges are not political organizations; they are no business syndicates; they are not social cliques. The average Freemason looks askance at the brother who seems to seek assistance of such sort. However, it is not to be denied that the strong and enduring friendships formed in the lodge are a real assistance to a man in all of his legitimate endeavors. But we must not forget that if we assist a brother Freemason in his endeavors, we assist him as a friend, and not because there is anything in Masonry that teaches us to discriminate in favor of Freemasons in the ordinary relationships of life.

It is a common error to regard charity as that sentiment which prompts us to extend assistance to the unfortunate. Charity as a Masonic sense has a much broader meaning, and embraces affection and goodwill toward all mankind, but more especially our brethren in Freemasonry. It is this sentiment which prompts a Freemason to suffer long and be kind, to control his temper, forgive the erring, reach forth his hand to stay a falling brother, to warn him of his error and whisper in his ear that correction which his fault may demand, to close his ear to slander and his lips to reproach; in short, to do unto others as he would be done by.

Charity as applied to Freemasonry is different from the usual and accepted meaning. All true Masons meet upon the same level, regardless of wealth or station. In giving assistance we strive to avoid the too common error of considering charity only as that sentiment of commensuration which leads us to assist the poor and unfortunate with pecuniary donations. Its Masonic application is more noble and more extensive. We are taught not only to relieve a brother's material wants, the cry of hunger, etc., but to fellowship with him upon our own level, stripped of worldly titles and honors. When we thus appeal to him, giving spiritual advice, lifting him up morally and spiritually with no sense of humiliation to him, we set him free from his passion and wants. To such charity there is a reciprocity rich in brotherly love and sincere appreciation.

Divinity has wisely divided the act of charity into many branches, and has taught us many paths to goodness. As many ways as we may do good, so many ways we may be charitable. There are infirmities not only of the body, but of the soul, which require the merciful hand of our abilities. I cannot condemn a man for ignorance, but must behold him with pity. It is no greater charity to clothe his body than to apparel the nakedness of his soul.

It is an honorable object to see the reason of other men wear our liveries, and their borrowed understanding do homage to the bounty of ours. It is like the natural charity of the sun, which illuminates another without obscuring itself. To be reserved in this part of goodness is the most sordid piece of covetousness, and more contemptible than pecuniary avarice.

Benevolence is absolute and real. So much benevolence as a man has, so much life has he; for all good things proceed out of this same spirit, which is differently named love, justice and temperance in its different applications, just as the ocean receives different names on the several shores which it washes. True benevolence, indeed, extends itself through the whole compass of existence, and sympathizes with the distress of every creature of sensation. Little minds may be apt to consider a compassion of this inferior kind as an instance of weakness; but it is undoubtedly the evidence of a noble nature. Homer thought it not unbecoming the character even of a hero to melt into tears at a distress of this sort, and has given us a most amiable and affecting picture of Ulysses weeping over his faithful dog, Argos, when he expires at his feet.

Freemasonry has no place for the little, selfish side of man. Its secrets are as the dead to him who looks at life that way. It looks for the man with the bigger soul, with the more universal spirit; it stops and stay with him only who sees man's mission in the betterment of the human race, who can take by the hand the fellow who is down and out, and put him on his feet and send him on his way a better man. Its teachings are wonderfully practical and godlike when once we recognize them.

It gives the individual a higher conception of a more definite mission; but while this is the spirit of Freemasonry, do we all recognize it? For no man can understand and appreciate it until he has pondered long and faithfully upon its teachings. Too many, alas,! fail to understand or get that broader vision which our obligations are intended to give. To them Freemasonry is a failure; they are neither active nor practical Masons, but merely hangers-on. Such is not the fault of Freemasonry, but is due to the fact that they have failed to mix thought and action.

Every day one meets the so-called Freemason. He is in evidence everywhere. Perhaps he has been Master, or even Grand Master. Perhaps the Fraternity has bestowed upon him every possible honor. He knows he has reached the highest rung in the ladder of his personal ambition. There he halts. There he comes to a dead stop. He throws Freemasonry aside as he would an old shoe or a sucked lemon. He ceases to attend lodge meetings. He has no more interest in the Fraternity. There is not enough Masonic spirit left in him even to subscribe to a Masonic paper. To all intents and purposes, so far as Freemasonry is concerned, he is dead. He professes, but he does not possess, and really never did possess, the real Masonic spirit.

The real Freemason is the man in whose everyday life one sees an exemplification of true Freemasonry. The real Mason may be as poor as a church mouse, or he may be the richest man on earth. But poor or rich, destitute or otherwise, the real Freemason demonstrates the teachings of the Fraternity in his daily life, in his business and social dealings with his fellow-men, in his

religion and in his politics. The real Mason does not lose his interest in Freemasonry of his interest in his brethren. Age, position, wealth – these do not deaden his Masonic ardor. The real Freemason never says: "I am not interested in Freemasonry; I have lost my brotherly feelings; I have gone to seed."

Unless a man has the right kind of a heart you cannot make him the right kind of a Freemason. You can fill his brain full of obligations and teach him by symbols, and send him forth from the lodge room loaded to the guards with good intentions, and if his heart is not right he will walk a block out of his way to keep from giving a poor beggar a nickel, and then hasten back again, circulate a scandal, or interfere in matters that do not concern him. Charity, that God Given part of a man, and the foundation of Freemasonry, is lacking in his composition, and therefore he can be a Freemason only in name.

Charity or friendship, as it may well be called – is just the habit of giving our life to others; when we give our life away we possess more of it; the more we give, the more we receive.

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. The true Freemason 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 also, who need his assistance and have a claim upon his sympathy.

Charity presupposes Justice, He who truly loves his brother respects the rights of his brother; but he does more – he forgets his own. Egoism sells or takes. Love delights in giving. In God, love is what it is in us, but in an infinite degree. God is inexhaustible in His Charity, as He is inexhaustible in His essence. That infinite omnipotence and infinite charity which, by an admirable good-will, draws from the bosom of its immense love the favors which it incessantly bestows on the world and on humanity, teaches us that the more we give, the more we possess.

Buddha said: "The Charitable man is loved by all; his friendship is prized highly; in death his heart is at rest and full of joy, for he suffers not from repentance; he receives the opening flower of his reward and the fruit that ripens from it. The charitable man has found the path of salvation. He is like the man who plants a sapling, securing thereby the shade, the flowers and the fruit in future years. Even so is the result of charity; even so is the joy of him who helps those who are in need of assistance."

Confucius said: "Love is to conquer self and turn to courtesy. Could we conquer self and turn to courtesy for but one day, all mankind would turn to love. The signs of love are ever courteous of eye and ever courteous of ear; to be ever courteous in word and ever courteous in deed. Without the door to behave as though a great guest were come; to treat the people as though we tendered the high sacrifice; not to do unto others what we would not they should do unto us; to breed no wrongs in the home. To be respectful at home, painstaking at work, faithful to all. Love is to mete out five things to all below heaven – modesty and bounty, truth, earnestness and

kindness. Modesty escapes insult; bounty wins the many; truth gains men's trust; earnestness brings success; kindness is the key to men's work."

There are two principles which divide the wills of men; covetousness and charity, Covetousness uses God and enjoys the world; charity is the opposite.

Charity should be a distinguishing characteristic of every Freemason. It is in the practice of this virtue that man most nearly reveals his kinship to God.

The doctrines of Freemasonry are the most beautiful that it is possible to imagine. They breathe the simplicity of the earliest ages, animated by the love of a martyred God. That word which the Puritans translated "Charity," but which is truly "Love," is the keystone which supports the entire edifice of this mystic science. Love one another, teach one another, help one another. That is all our doctrine, all our science, all our law. We have no narrow-minded prejudices; we do not debar from our society this sect or that sect; it is sufficient for us that a man worships God, no matter under what name or in what manner. Ah! Rail against us, bigoted and ignorant men, if you will. Those who listen to the truths which Freemasonry inculcates can readily forgive you. It is impossible to be a good Freemason without being a good man.

The immutable law of God requires that besides respecting the absolute rights of others, and being merely just, we should do good, be charitable, and obey the dictates of the generous and noble sentiments of the soul. Charity is a law because our conscience is not satisfied nor at ease if we have not relieved the suffering, the distressed, the destitute. It is to give that which he to whom you give has no right to take or demand. To be charitable is obligatory on us. We are the almoners of God's bounties. But the obligation is not so precise and inflexible as the obligation to be just. Charity knows neither rule nor limit. It goes beyond all obligations. Its beauty consists in its liberty. "He that loveth not, knoweth not God; for God is Love. If we love one another, God dwelleth in us, and His love is perfected in us. God is love; and he that dwelleth in love, dwelleth in God, and God in him."

To be kindly affectionate one to another with brotherly love; to relieve the necessities of the needy; and be generous, liberal and hospitable; to return to no man evil for evil; to rejoice at the good fortune of others, and sympathize with them in their sorrows and reverses; to live peaceably with all men, and repay injuries with benefits and kindness; these are the sublime dictates of the Moral Law, taught from the infancy of the world by Freemasonry.

Antiquity knew, described and practiced charity; the first feature of which, so touching – and, thank God! So common – is goodness, as its loftiest one is heroism. Charity is devotion to another; and it is ridiculously senseless to pretend that there ever was an age of the world when the human soul was deprived of that part of its heritage – the power of devotion. But it is certain that Christianity has diffused and popularized this virtue, and that before Christ these words were never spoken:

"LOVE ONE ANOTHER; FOR THAT IS THE WHOLE LAW."

Love would put a new face on this weary old world, in which we lived as pagans and enemies too long; and it would warm the heart to see how fast the vain diplomacy of statesmen, the impotence of armies and navies, and lines of defense, would be superseded by this unarmed child. Love will creep where force cannot go, will accomplish that by imperceptible methods – being its own lever, fulcrum and power – which force could never achieve.

Have you not seen in the woods, in a late autumn morning, a poor fungus or mushroom, a plant without any solidity – nay, that seemed nothing but a soft mush or jelly – by its constant, total and inconceivably gentle pushing, manage to break its way up through the frosty ground, and actually to lift a hard crust on its head? It is the symbol of the power of kindness.

The virtue of this principle in human society in application to great interests is obsolete and forgotten. Once or twice in history it has been tried, with signal success. This great, overgrown, dead Christendom of ours still keeps alive at least the name of a lover of mankind. But one day all men will be lovers; and every calamity will be dissolved in the universal sunshine.

The power of gentleness is too little seen in the world; the subduing influences of pity, the might of love, the control of mildness over passion, the commanding majesty of that perfect character which mingles grave displeasure with grief and pity for the offender. So it is that Freemason should treat his brethren who go astray; not with bitterness; nor yet with good-natured easiness, nor with worldly indifference, nor with philosophic coldness, nor with laxity of conscience; that accounts everything well that passes under the seal of public opinion; but with charity and with pitying loving-kindness. Charity and loving-kindness are two words that comprehend the whole political and religious creed of Freemasonry. The law of charity cannot have been enacted by, nor the spirit of loving-kindness cannot have emanated from a cruel and ferocious God. It is the expression of the Divine Will because it is of the Divine Nature.

What of the hour in Freemasonry? Brighter – Stronger – Clearer. We often become discouraged and are inclined to be pessimistic, but amid all the errors and stumbling, a better day is dawning when we shall see the beneficent labors of Freemasonry shining in effulgent splendor.

Freemasonry is growing in power, and as its immortal principles take root in the fallow soil of the human heart and mind, it buds and blossoms into foliage of kindness and the fruit of charity toward all mankind.

Let me be a little kinder;
Let me be a little blinder
To the faults of those about me;
Let me praise a little more.

Let me be, when I am weary,
Just a little bit more cheery;
Let me serve a little better
Those that I am striving for.

Let me be a little braver
When temptation bids me waver;
Let me strive a little harder
To be all that I should be.

Let me be a little meeker
With a brother who is weaker;
Let me think more of my neighbor,
And a little less of me.

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