

THE SYMBOLISM OF THE SQUARE AND COMPASSES

The Master carries with him, a great symbol. It is one of the immoveable jewels. The square is the symbol of regulated life and actions. It is the Masonic rule for correcting and harmonising conduct of principles or morality and virtue, and as a symbol, it is dedicated to the Master. We also identify ourselves with this symbol, because we are taught that squares, levels and perpendiculars are the proper signs to know a mason

You were introduced to the square and compasses very early in your Masonic career - in fact, they were among the first items discussed on your night of Initiation. They are in evidence throughout all Lodge meetings, and it is therefore desirable that you should have a ready understanding of their Masonic significance.

The dictionary defines "emblem" as a symbol, while "symbol" is an emblem, but typifying a special quality or concept. It adds that a symbol implies a transfer of meaning from the physical emblem to an idea by means of an allegory or metaphor.

This is not confusing when you consider that the letters of the alphabet are symbols and when combined into words they convey all kinds of meanings to you, the amount depending upon your knowledge. They Convey meanings because you recognise them and can associate them with understandable facts and experiences. Until this is so, the meanings are hidden: if you cannot read, the messages are lost.

So it is in Freemasonry, which is illustrated by symbols. The symbols of Masonry are used to reveal its meanings, not to conceal them but they will remain concealed until one can read the symbols, and understand them, and can recognise and interpret the message contained in each one.

So when we talk of the symbolism of an emblem we the metaphor of transferred meaning associated with

The square, the compasses, and the square and compasses combined have long been accepted as Masonic symbols to teach Masons to "square their actions and to keep them within due bounds". The fact that these emblems enjoy universal recognition of what they stand for was proved in a celebrated court case in the U.S.A. during the 19th century when it was ruled that the sign of the square and compasses belonged exclusively to Freemasonry.

Let us look at the two parts separately. The square as a tool of operative masons was used to test the accuracy of the sides of a stone; to prove that they were squares with regard to the other sides, and that all angles were identical. It thus acted as a standard from which the stones were judged as being fit or otherwise for the building.

The square has two meanings - the angle of 90° , or the fourth part of a circle, and the two-armed implement containing an angle of 90° . It has been used symbolically for a long time. To the Chinese in 2500 BC "square" meant honest and straightforward. By the 4th Century BC Mencius taught that all men must apply the square figuratively to their lives if they wished to walk in the straight paths of wisdom and keep within the bounds of honour and virtue.

Note, too, that nowhere in nature is a perfect square to be found. Normally it must be made by man working with materials - wood, stone, metals - provided by nature. From this we infer that man must work with the GAOTU to secure the bounty He bestows upon His creatures.

In Masonry the square is a symbol of morality and is presented as one of the Great Lights, a Working Tool, and the emblem of the W.M. It inculcates the principle of morality, honesty and truthfulness, and points out our duty to our neighbour, to all Mankind, and to the Craft.

The compasses were used by operative masons to mark out the ground from the scaled plans of the intended structure. This instrument, working with one point in the centre, describes the circumference of a circle, thus limiting an area to the part enclosed. In the same way the compasses remind us that in His unerring and impartial justice, God has defined the limits of good and evil, and that we shall be rewarded or punished according to the way we have kept within this circumference or gone beyond it.

The symbolism of the compasses thus supplements the inner light we obtain from the V.S.L. by pointing out the duty we owe to ourselves - the duty of keeping our desires within due bounds, and of circumscribing our passions and prejudices. Without this voluntary restriction, this practice of self-discipline, we cannot be fully free.

The square and compasses, then, refer to a Mason's duty to the Craft and to himself, a symbol of Brotherhood appropriate to the ideals of Masonry. This combination is very old, too, as the Chinese for many generations BC used the square and compasses to suggest order, regularity and propriety.

The position of the square and compasses on the V.S.L. has special significance now, connected with the progress of the candidate through the degrees. However, during the 18th Century the points of the compasses and the ends of the arms of

the square were directed away from the Master toward the candidate to indicate that he was included in the body of Freemasonry.

From the symbolism of the square and compasses we can learn the way to live. The standard of life, or the standard of living, cannot be measured in terms of material things like cars, TV sets and other technical devices, excellent though they are. They are merely aids to living. The real standard is measured in terms of intangible factors; obligation to the family and friends, widening to concern for one's neighbour, to the acceptance of responsibility toward the weak - welfare of the community in place of gain for self. This is what we understand by morality and this is what we practise when we act upon the square.

As Joseph Fort Newton "The Builders" writes,

"A society without standards will be a society without stability and it will one day go down. Not only nations but whole civilisations have perished in the past for lack of righteousness. Hence the importance attached to the square of virtue, and the reasons why Masons call it the symbol of their Craft. It is the symbol of that moral law upon which life must be based if it is to continue."

So we as Masons know that the square and compasses are not just abstract symbols, but through their symbolism they show us that every day, no matter with whom we are or where we are, we should "Square our actions and keep them within due bounds".

Bibliography:

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