

Letter to N. N.

Leo Tolstoy

1883

My Dear N. N.

I address you as "dear," not because this is a customary form, but because since I received your first letter, and especially since your second one came, I feel that we are very closely united, and I love you dearly. In the feeling which I experience, there is much that is egotistical. You certainly do not think so, but you cannot imagine to what degree I am alone, to what a degree the actual "I" is scorned by all surrounding me. I know that he that endures to the end will be saved: I know that only in trifles is the right given to a man to take advantage of the fruit of his labor, or even to look on this fruit, but that in the matter of divine truth which is eternal it cannot be given to a man to see the fruit of his work, especially in the brief period of his short life: I know all this, and yet I am often despondent, and therefore my meeting with you and the hope, almost the certainty, of finding in you a man who is sincerely going with me in one way, and to one and the same good, is to me very cheering.

Now, then, I will reply in a systematic way. Your letters to Aksakof, especially the last one, pleased me. Your arguments are irresistible, but for him do not exist. Everything he says I knew long ago. This is all repeated in life, in literature, in conversations; it is always the same thing and the same thing. And this is precisely what it is: You say, "I see that this is the truth and this other is false, for this reason and for that, and that this is good and that is evil, for this reason and for that."

Aksakof and those like him see that this is the truth; even before you have told them they know the truth. But they live in falsehood, but for a man, for any one with a heart which loves right, and hates wrong, and by reason has one purpose of distinguishing truth from falsehood, for such a man to be able to live in falsehood and evil, and to serve them, he must beforehand have shut his eyes to the truth, and continue to do the wrong which he loves. But all have the same kind of blinders: the historical perspective, the objective glance, worry about others, and the setting aside of the question of one's relation to goodness and truth.

This Aksakof is doing, this Soloviof is doing, this all the theologians are doing, this all the governmental people, the political economists, are doing, this is what all who live contrary to truth and goodness and who must justify themselves in their own hearts are doing.

"And this is tJic judgment, that the light is come into the world, and men loved the darkness rather than the light, for their works zvere evil. For every one that practices evil hates the light,

and comes not to the light, lest his works should be reprov'd. But he that practices the truth comes to the light, that his works may be made manifest that have been wrought in God.”¹

It is impossible to express this more clearly than it is said here. From this I draw this conclusion, that it is not necessary to fling pearls to these people, but that one must elaborate a certain relation to them in which our forces will not be wasted. Argument with them is not only an idle business, but injurious to our object. They provoke us by argument to something superfluous, incorrect; and, forgetting all that is most important in what you have said, they stick to this one thing. The relation to them which I try to cultivate in myself, and inculcate in others, is the same as my relation to a depraved drunken youth who should try to contaminate my sixteen-year-old son. I am sorry for this young libertine, but I do not try to reform him, because I know it is impossible. If I chide him, he will only turn me into ridicule before my son. I do not even forcibly remove my son from him, because my son will surely meet him or his like again, if not to-day, then to-morrow. I do not even try to make my son see his wickedness. My son himself must discover it. But I strive to fill my son's soul with such instruction that the young libertine's temptations do not appeal to him; otherwise our resources, which are so small, are wasted in throwing away the pearls, and they go on trampling upon and rending, not you and me, N. N., but what is worse, extinguishing the little light that is dawning amid the darkness.

And here, by this digression, I come directly to the second and most important point of your letter. But how to open the eyes of men, to save them from the blandishments of the libertines, when evidence prevents this? How bring about the accomplishment of evangelical teaching? Ought I not to defend people if they ask me for help, even if it came about that they must be freed by violence, if before my eyes people are beaten and killed? To defend and free people by violence is not necessary, because this is impossible, and because to try to do good by violence, that is by wrong, is stupid.

My dear, please, for the sake of God's truth which you serve, do not make undue haste, do not lose patience, do not invent proofs of the justice of your opinion before you have thought over, not what I write you, but the Gospels, and not the Gospels as the word of Christ or God and the like, but the Gospels as the clearest, simplest, and most universally comprehensible and practical teaching of how each one of us and all men must live.

If before my eyes a mother is cutting her child to pieces, what must I do? Understand that the question is what ought I to do, that is, what is right and reasonable, and not what will be my first impulse in regard to it. My first impulse at a private insult is to avenge it; but the question comes: Is this reasonable? And exactly the same question arises whether it is reasonable to employ violence upon the mother who is cutting up her child. If the mother is murdering her child, what is it that is painful to me, and I consider wrong? The fact that the child is suffering, or the fact that the mother is experiencing, not the joy of love, but the torments of hate? And I think that the evil is in both. One man cannot do anything evil. Evil is the discord of men, and therefore, if I wish to act, I can only do so with the aim of putting an end to the discord, and bringing about concord between the mother and child.

How must I act? Constrain the mother? I do not destroy her discord the sin with her child, but I only induce a new sin, a discord between her and myself. What is possible? One thing to put myself in the child's place. This will not be unreasonable.

¹ John iii. 19-21.

What Dostoyevsky wrote, and is very repugnant to me, is said to me by ascetic monks and metropolitans, to wit, that it is possible to wage wars, that this is self-defense to offer your life for your brethren; and I have always replied, to defend them by your own breast, offering yourself, is right, but to shoot people with guns is not self-defense, but murder. Investigate the teaching of the Gospels, and you will see that the third brief commandment,² not to resist evil, that is, not to return evil for evil, is, I will not say the chief, but is the keystone of the whole teaching, and the very thing which all pseudo-Christian commentaries have strenuously avoided and still avoid, and is the very position, the denial of which serves as the foundation of all that you so righteously hate.

I am not speaking of the council of Nicaea, which accomplished so much evil, and was based on this very same understanding of Christ's teaching, that is, on violence in the name of right and of Christ; in the apostolic times, in Paul, in the Acts, this idea of violence in the name of right is begotten, and destroys the meaning of the doctrine.

How often it has happened ludicrously to me in my conversations with popes and revolutionists, who regarded the evangelical teaching as a weapon for the attainment of external objects, that men of these two classes standing at opposite poles, yet with unanimous heat, denied this special datum of Christ's teaching. For the first, it is impossible not to lose temper, to choke off dissidents, not to glorify the battlefield and capital punishments; for the second, it is impossible not to use violence in destroying the existing, ugly disorder which is called order. Evidently popes and authorities cannot even imagine the lives of men without violence. Exactly so it is with the revolutionists.

You know a tree by its fruits; a good tree cannot bring forth the fruits of violence. Christ's teaching cannot justify the one in choking, or the other in putting out of the way. And therefore both the one party and the other, distorting the doctrine, deprive themselves of that true force which is given by faith in the truth, in the whole truth, and not in a small fraction of it.

Those that lift the sword shall perish with the sword; this is not a prediction, but the assertion of a fact known to all. The lamp of the body is the eye; if therefore thine eye be single, thy whole body shall be full of light. But if thine eye be evil, thy whole body shall be full of darkness. If therefore the light that is in thee be darkness, how great is the darkness!

If thy light is darkness, if what you consider good is evil, the work also of thy life will be evil. It is impossible to serve God a little, the devil also a little. And the Gospel is not such a stupid book as the popes make it out for us. And each proposition is laid down in it, not idly, but so that it is organically connected with the whole teaching; thus the command as to nonresistance of evil runs through the whole of the Gospels, and without it the teaching of the Gospel, for me at least, wholly falls to the ground.

Moreover, it is expressed another time so clearly and directly that it is impossible to escape it; moreover, the whole account of Christ's life and actions is an application of this commandment; moreover in John, Caiaphas is represented as not comprehending this truth, and the consequence of not understanding this truth, under the pretext of the advantage of the people, ruining Christ's life, there directly points to the fact that resistance of evil is the most terrible and dangerous temptation, and that not only Christ's disciples yielded, but the Master himself almost did.

² You have heard that it was said, An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth; but I say unto you, Resist not evil; but whoever smites you on the right cheek turn to him the other also. MATTHEW x. 38, 39.

But, moreover, it now seems to me that even if Christ and his teaching had not existed, I myself should have discovered this truth, so simple and clear it seems to me now, and I am persuaded will seem equally clear to you. It is now so clear to me that, if I allow myself the slightest violence under the pretext of correcting the greatest evil, then another on the same pretext will allow himself to commit the smallest act of violence, and a third and a fourth and millions of trifling acts of violence will compose the awful evil which now reigns in the world and crushes us.

Now if you have heeded my request and have read calmly, refraining from the proofs of the confirmation of your opinion, but have followed my exposition, then I hope you have agreed that these are powerful proofs of the opinion which you oppose, and I hope still further that you will agree with me when you have read my short exposition³ and my translation of the four Gospels which I send you.

As far as I can imagine, you are now in such a position; your reason tells you that I am right, but your heart revolts against such a position in regard to the nonresistance of evil. You say to yourself:

” Whatever here is wrong, whatever mistakes in judgment are here, I will find it and I will prove it, because it cannot be that Christ’s teaching, the teaching of love to your brother, should lead a man to sit down and fold his arms while looking on at the evil that is taking place in the world.

” It is all very well,” you say, ” for him, a worn-out old man, to indulge in idle chatter and try to persuade every one that evil must be endured. It is very well for him, he is fat and contented, he has everything he needs, and only a little while to live. All the warmth of his life has been used up, while I feel without argument that love for goodness and truth is not lodged in me, and hatred of evil and falsehood, without some purpose. I cannot help expressing it, I cannot live in its name, and every step of my life is a battle with evil. And I am bound to fight, and I shall fight it with such means as have already been opened up to me, or will present themselves in the future. Propagandism is necessary among the people, connection with the dissidents, action on the government, and the like.”

The feeling that suggests this is a good feeling, and I love you for it; but this same feeling incited Peter to draw his knife and cut off the servant’s ear. Imagine to yourself what would have happened if Jesus had not restrained them: a riot would have taken place, Jesus’ followers would have fled, and then they would have captured Jerusalem. They would have cut men down and they would have been cut down. What would have been the Christian teaching? It would not have been, and there would have been nothing for us to boast about; we should have been worse than the Aksakofs and Soloviofs.

In order that you may more freely express my thought, I will tell you what I think, in what I consider Christ’s teaching consists a teaching not misty and metaphysical, but a clear and vital teaching.

All say that the significance of Christianity lies in loving God and your neighbor as yourself. But what is this God? What is it to love? How can one love anything incomprehensible God? What is one’s neighbor? What am I myself?

These words have for me this meaning: to love God means to love truth; to love one’s neighbor as one’s self means to acknowledge the unity of the essence of one’s soul and life with every other human life with eternal truth God.

³ Vol. xvii. p. 281, ”The Gospel in Brief.”

Thus it is for me.

But it is clear to me that these words, which really define nothing, may be understood otherwise, and that the majority cannot even understand them as I do. The principal thing is that these words neither for me nor for any one else entail any obligation or define anything. What can be the love of a God whom every one understands in his own way, and whom others do not recognize at all, and what can be the love for a neighbor as for oneself, when I am filled with a self-love which never for an instant leaves me, and often with a constant hatred to others?

This is all so obscure and impracticable that it remains an empty phrase. My opinion is that this position is metaphysical, very important as such, but when this position is accepted as a rule of life, as a law, then it is simply stupid. And unfortunately it is frequently so understood. I say all this so as to explain that the significance of Christianity, as of every other religion, is not found in metaphysical principles, metaphysical principles exist in all humanity: Buddha, Confucius, Socrates, have always been and will always be the same, but in the application of them to life, in the vital production of that happiness of every man and of all humanity which is attained by the application of these principles to life, to explaining the possibility of the application of them and to the definition of the rules whereby it is attained.

Even in Deuteronomy it says: Love God and your neighbor as yourself; but the application of this principle, according to Deuteronomy, consisted in circumcision, the Sabbath, and the criminal law.

The significance of Christianity consists in proving the possibility and the blessedness of fulfilling the law of love. Christ, in the Sermon on the Mount, very clearly defined how it was necessary and possible for one's own happiness and that of all men to fulfill this law. In the Sermon on the Mount without which there would have been no teaching of Christ, what all agree in is that which Christ says, not to the wise, but to the illiterate, the clownish, in this sermon, which is provided with an introduction in regard to the person who shall break one of the least of the commandments (Matthew v. 17-20), and with an exordium to the effect that it is not necessary to speak but to fulfill (Matthew vii. 21-27), in this sermon the whole thing is said, and five commands are given as to the way of fulfilling the teaching.

In the Sermon on the Mount, the simplest, easiest, most comprehensible rules are laid down for love to God and one's neighbor, and for living without recognizing and fulfilling these commands it is idle to speak of Christianity. And strange as it may seem to say this after eighteen hundred years, it was brought to me to expound these rules as something new. And only when I understood these rules did I understand the significance of Christ's teaching. These rules so wonderfully embrace the whole life of every man and of all humanity, that only let a man proceed to fulfill these rules on earth and we should have on earth the reign of righteousness!

And then analyze all of these rules separately, applying them to yourself, and you will see that this unimaginably blessed and enormous result will be derived from the fulfillment of these most simple and natural, and not only easy, but also pleasant rules.

Do you imagine that it would be necessary for anything to be added to these rules in order for the kingdom of righteousness to exist? Nothing is necessary.

Do you imagine that anything could be taken from these rules without the kingdom of righteousness being infringed? Impossible!

If I knew nothing of Christ's teaching except these five rules, I should be just as much a Christian as I am now:

I. Be not angry. II. Do not commit fornication.

III. Take no oaths.

IV. Judge not; and V. Do not go to war.

For me this constitutes the essence of Christ's teaching. And this clear expression of Christ's teaching has been hidden from men, and consequently humanity has constantly wandered away from it in two opposite directions. Some, seeing in Christ's teaching the teaching of saving their souls for the sake of an eternal life, coarsely presented to them, were estranged from the world, striving only to do what they could to perfect themselves in solitude; this would have been ridiculous if it had not been so pitiful. And terrible efforts were put forth by these people, and there have been many of them, on an impossible and stupid thing, to do good to themselves in solitude, away from men.

Others, on the contrary, not believing in a future life, have lived the best of them only for others, but did not know and did not care to know what was necessary for themselves, or why they wanted to do good to others and what this good was.

It seems to me that the one is impossible without the other: a man cannot do good to himself, to his soul, without doing for others and with others, as religious ascetics, and the best of them, have done; and a man cannot do good to men if he does not know what is necessary for him, and why he is acting, as has been done and is done by social workers without any faith.

I like men of the first kind, but with all the strength of my soul I hate their doctrine; and I like very much men of the second kind, and I hate their doctrine. There is truth only in that teaching which demands activity a life which satisfies the demands of the soul, and at the same time is a constant activity for the good of others. Such was Christ's teaching. It is at once far from the quietism of the monk and from the anxiety about the soul and from the ardor of the revolutionist governmental, priestly activity is revolutionary who wishes to load others with benefits, and yet at the same time does not know what the true indubitable blessing is.

The Christian's life is such that it is impossible to do good to men otherwise than by doing good to himself, to his reasonable soul, and not to do good to himself otherwise than by doing good to his brethren. The Christian life is at once far removed from quietism and from agitation. Young people even of your turn of thought are inclined to confuse the true Christian teaching with the quietism of the superstitious, and it seems to them that to renounce the resistance of evil by violence is very easy and convenient, and that from this the Christian movement grows feeble and is deprived of force. This is not true. You understand that the Christian renounces violence, not because he does not love what you desire, not because he does not see that violence is the first impulse that seizes a man at the sight of evil, but because he sees that violence shuts him off from his goal, and does not bring him near it, that it is not reasonable, as it is not reasonable for a man desiring to reach the water of a fountain to strike with his cane the earth which separates him from the spring; and for the man abstaining from violence it is no easier on the contrary; just as it is no easier to take a spade and dig, than it is to pound the ground with a stake.

It is easier for him only because he assuredly knows that by not opposing evil with violence, but by meeting it with goodness and truth, he is doing what he can to fulfill the will of the Father, according to Christ's expression. It is impossible to quench fire with fire, to dry water with water, by evil to annihilate evil. This has been tried, tried since the world began, and now we are brought to that condition in which we now live. It would seem to be time to put aside the old way and undertake a new one, especially as it is more reasonable. If there is any advance, then it is only due to those that repay good for evil. Oh, if only one-millionth of those efforts

which are employed by men to overcome evil by violence were employed in enduring evil, not taking part in it, and shining by the light that is given to every man!

Though simple from the customary point of view nothing has been attained by this; then why not try the other, the more that it is so clear, manifest, and joyous? Here is a particular example; let us remember Russia during the last twenty years. How much genuine desire for righteousness, how much readiness for sacrifices, has been wasted by our intelligent classes by establishing right, in doing good to men? And what has been done? Nothing, worse than nothing! There has been a terrible waste of spiritual energies! They have broken the stake and they have beaten down the earth worse than before, which does not save the spade. Instead of these terrible sacrifices which are endured by the young, instead of the gunshots, explosions, printing-offices, what if these people should believe in Christ's teaching, that is, should come to the conclusion that the Christian life is the only reasonable life, that if instead of this terrible expenditure of force, one, two, a dozen, a hundred men, when called to military service, should say: " We cannot serve murderers, because we believe in Christ's teaching, which we preach. This is forbidden by His law."

They would say the same thing in relation to taking the oath, they would say the same thing in relation to courts, they would say the same thing and put it into practice in regard to the violence which supports private property; what would be the outcome of this I do not know, but I know that it would help the matter along, and that this is one way of fruitful activity not to act contrary to Christ's teaching, and boldly and openly to confirm it and not merely for the attainment of external aims, but for one's inner satisfaction, which consists in not doing evil to others while one is not yet strong enough to do them good.

This is my answer to your questions as to what is necessary to attain. It is necessary to attain this the fulfillment of Christ's laws, and making plain to men the light and pleasure of fulfilling them.

All this, however, is better said in Matthew v. 13-16. I anticipate one further objection. You will say: " It is not clear how to fulfill these rules and to what they will lead us. How according to these rules to act toward private property, toward the authorities, toward international relations? "

Do not imagine that in Christ there was any lack of clearness. All is clear as day. The relation toward the authorities is told in the story of the penny. Money private property is not a Christian matter. It comes from the authorities; give it back to the authorities. But your free soul is from the God of truth, and therefore give not your actions, your freedom of reason, to any one, except to God. They may kill you, but they cannot compel you to kill and to do an unchristian act.

As to private property, there, is no private property according to the Gospels, and woe to those that have it; that is to say, it is bad for them, and so in whatever position a Christian finds himself, he cannot do anything in relation to the private property of any one else than not take part in the violence perpetrated in the name of private property; and he must assure others that private property is a myth, there is no private property, but there is a certain customary use of force in relation to the advantage of things which men call private property, and which is bad. For the man who shall give away his cloak when they want to deprive him of his shirt there can be no talk of private property.

Neither can there be any question of international relations. All men are brothers of the same sort. And if a Zulu should come to murder my children, the only thing I can do is to try to persuade the Zulu that this is not to his advantage and not good to persuade him, submitting to

him by violence, the more so as there is no certainty in fighting with the Zulu. Either he gets the better of me, and, still more, murders my children, or I get the advantage, and my children the next day will be taken down with some illness, and suffer more, and die of it. There is no certainty, because if I submit I probably do better, while if I enter into a contest with him, it is a question whether I do any better.

This, then, is my answer: the very best thing that we can do is to fulfill all of Christ's teaching. But in order to fulfill it we must be convinced that it is true, both for all humanity and for each one of us. Have you this faith?

I think it best to print your article, though with some abbreviation. There are still two objections or questions which I raise; you will make them to me. The first is: What if, by submitting, as I say, to the Zulu and to the policeman, and by giving up to the evil man all that he wishes to take from me, if by not taking part in governmental institutions of courts, educational institutions, universities, by not recognizing private property, you fall to the lowest degree of the social scale, you are trodden down and abused, you become a tramp a beggar, and the light which is in you is wasted, no one sees it; and therefore is it not better to keep one's self at a certain degree of independence of need, and the possibility of refinement and intercourse with the great majority of the people? It really seems so. And it seems so because so dear to us are the amenities of life, our refinement, and all those so-called pleasures which it provides us, and we act against our conscience saying so. It is unjust because on whatever low plane he may stand he will always be with men, and therefore in a condition to do them good. But whether the professors of a university are better, whether the inmates of a cheap lodginghouse are more important, for the Christian profession, is a question which no one can decide. My own feeling and Christ's example plead for the indigent; only the indigent can preach, that is, teach the reasonable life.

I may argue beautifully and be sincere, but no one will ever have faith in me as long as it is seen that I am living in a palace and with my family wasting every day the cost of a whole year's food for a poor family. But as regards our so-called culture, surely it would seem to be time to cease speaking of it as of a blessing. In spoiling a man, it spoils altogether ninety-nine out of a hundred, but it can never add anything to a man.

You probably know about Siutayef. Here we have an unlettered muzhik, but his influence on men, on our intelligence, is greater and more important than all the Russian savants and writers, including all the Pushkins and Byelinskys, from Tretyakovsky down to our time.⁴ So in losing you lose nothing. And if any one leaves father and mother and brethren and wife and children, he will find a hundred times more here in this world, and houses and fathers and the eternal life besides. "Many tjiat are first shall be last."⁵

Now the second question, directly, involuntarily proceeding from the first: "Now here are you, Lyof Nikolayevitch, preaching and preaching, but how do you fulfill what you preach? "

This question is most natural, and I am all the time asked it, and they always close my mouth triumphantly.

You preach, but how do you live?

And I reply that I do not preach and I cannot preach, though I passionately desire to. I can preach by deed, but my deeds are vile. What I say is not preaching, but is only a refutation of

⁴ Aleksandr Sergejevitch Pushkin, Russia's greatest lyric poet, born June 7, 1799, died Feb. 8, 1837; Vissarion Grigoryevitch Byelinsky, a famous Russian critic, born 1810, died 1848; Vasili Kirillovitch Tretyakovsky, translator, poetaster, scientist, born 1703, died 1769.

⁵ Matthew x. 29.

a false conception of the Christian doctrine, and an explanation of its actual significance. Its significance is not the reconstruction of society, in its name, by violent means; its significance is in finding the meaning of life in this world. The fulfillment of the five commandments gives this meaning. If you wish to be a Christian, then you must fulfill these commandments, but if you do not wish to fulfill them, then do not prate about Christianity outside of the fulfillment of these commandments.

But, they say to me, if you find that outside of the fulfillment of the Christian teaching there is no reasonable life, and you love this reasonable life, why do you not fulfill the commandments?

I reply that I am to blame, and vile, and worthy of scorn because I do not fulfill them, but in this respect not so much in the way of exculpation, as in explanation of my inconsistency, I say: "Look at my former life and look at my life now, and you will see that I am trying to fulfill them. I have not fulfilled one ten thousandth part, it is true, and I am to blame; but I have not fulfilled them, not because I have not wanted to, but because I could not. Teach me how to disentangle myself from the net of temptations in which I am caught; help me, and I will fulfill them; but even without help I wish and hope to fulfill them. Blame me! I myself do that, but blame me, and not the road by which I go, and which I point out to those that ask me where, in my opinion, the road is. If I know the road home, and go along it intoxicated, staggering from side to side, does that make it any the less the true way by which I go? If it is not the right way, show me another; if I go astray and stagger, help me, keep me on the real way, as I am ready to keep you; but do not beat me off, do not rejoice because I have lost my way, do not cry out in enthusiasm: "There he is! He says he is going home, but he is sprawling in the slough." No, do not rejoice in this, but help me, hold me!

For you see you are not devils of the slough, but likewise people going home. For I am alone, and I do not wish to fall into the slough. Help me! help me! my heart is bursting with despair, that we are all blundering; and when I am struggling with all my powers, you, every time we go astray, instead of feeling sorry for yourself and myself, cry with enthusiasm, "Lo, here we all are in the slough!"

This, then, is my relation to the teaching and its fulfillment. With all my might I am striving to fulfill it, and at every failure I not only confess it, but I beg for help so as to be in a condition to fulfill it, and I meet joyously every one who is seeking the way, even as I am, and heed him.

If you read what I am sending, the substance of this letter will be clearer to you.

Write me. I am very glad to correspond with you, and I shall await your reply with impatience.

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Leo Tolstoy
Letter to N. N.
1883

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