

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Letters to Friends on the Personal Christian Life

Leo Tolstoy

Leo Tolstoy
Letters to Friends on the Personal Christian Life
1900

Original text from RevoltLib.com, 2021.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net

1900

Contents

Letter to E. H. C.	6
Letter to a Private Friend	17
A Further Letter to the same Friend	19
On Compromise.	21
<i>The Figure Repeated</i>	31
From the Private MS. Diary.	32

“I cannot live with him.” “Ah, you cannot? Then give up living altogether, for it is precisely with him you are meant to live.” Or, “I wish to plow,—only not this field” (which is the first that has to be plowed). “Then it seems you are only pretending, and that you do not wish to plow.”

So it was with me, in regard to many and many people. “I cannot live with him; I will leave him, that will be better.” But how can it be better, when it is the worst thing that could possibly be done?

Everything, poor living, self-denial, hard work, humility itself,—everything is necessary for no other end than to enable one to live with mankind; to live with them, that is, to love them. But if there be no love, then all the rest is worthless. All our plowing is done so that what is sown may spring up; but if we trample the young crops, then where was the good of plowing?

From the Private MS. Diary.

There is only one way of serving mankind. That is, to become better yourself. "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." A man cannot denounce sin while standing in the mire of sin.

The problem for us all is one and the same: From our position of property, with our many wants, and absence of work useful to mankind,—to learn to live with fewer demands, without the wish for more, and to learn to do work that is unquestionably useful to men. And to this we must descend by degrees, that is, according to our attainment in the one direction and the other.

To be useful to men! How? Not with money; not even by doing material services. To sweep a skating rink, make boots, wash clothes, sit for a night with a sick person? Perhaps. All these acts may be good, and are better done for others than for oneself; but they may be bad, and, strictly speaking, are not absolutely necessary. One thing is undoubtedly useful and necessary, namely, to teach men to live rightly. But how to do that? There is one way—to live rightly oneself. Our error is, that men wish to teach so that the teaching shall be seen in visible results; to which end one must inevitably teach by words. But to teach by one's life is the surest of sure ways; only often, almost always, one will not see the fruit. One thing remains then: to live rightly. Help me, God!

People are for ever finding they cannot live together.

The Free Age Press stands for an attempt to assist in spreading those deep convictions in which the noblest spirits of every age and race have united—that man's true aim and happiness is "unity in reason and love"; the realization of the brotherhood of all men,—and that we *must* all strive to purge away, each from himself, those false ideas, false feelings, and false desires, personal, social, religious, political, racial, economic, which alienate us one from another and produce nine-tenths of the sum of human suffering.

Of these truly Christian and universally religious aspirations the writings of Leo Tolstoy are perhaps to-day the most definite expression, and it is to the production of 1d., 3d., and 6d. editions of all his known religious, social, and ethical works, together with the unpublished matter and future writings to which we have and shall have special access (being in close relationship with Tolstoy), that *The Free Age Press* will at first devote itself; trusting that all who sympathize will assist by every means in their power, especially in helping to spread the books the world over, losing no opportunity of introducing them whenever and wherever feasible, and of so making it possible for the work to be continued, and extended into wider and wider fields. As it is Tolstoy's desire that his books shall not be copyrighted, our editions will, whenever possible, be free to the world.

Suggestions, criticisms, inquiries, offers of help and cooperation will be gratefully welcomed; and it is specially requested that the names of any books that have helped towards a better understanding of life may be furnished, so that a much needed list may be compiled and published.

Letters, Private Orders, and Money Orders (it is hoped that friends will *purchase* as many copies as possible: even one will help) should be addressed to The Editors, "Free Age Press," Maldon, Essex. *Booksellers* must order from Messrs. Simpkin, Marshall, Hamilton, Kent, & Co. Ltd., London, E.C.; The Clarion

Co. Ltd., 72 Fleet Street, E.C.; Messrs. John Menzies & Co., Glasgow; and Mr. John Heywood, Manchester.

Uniform with
"On the Personal Christian Life."
Long 8vo, sewed, 3d. each; post free, 3½d.
(NO RIGHTS RESERVED)

THE FREE AGE PRESS
CHRISTCHURCH, HANTS
(*New Address*)
1900

Letter to E. H. C.

To E. H. C.
(*Translation by Aylmer Maude.*)

Dear Mr. —,— I am very glad to have news of your activity, and to hear that your work begins to attract attention. Fifty years ago Lloyd Garrison's Declaration of Nonresistance only estranged people from him; and Ballou's fifty years' labor in the same direction was constantly met by a conspiracy of silence. I now read with great pleasure in the *Voice* admirable thoughts by American writers on this question of Nonresistance. I need only demur at the notion expressed by Mr. B. It is an old but unfounded libel upon Christ to suppose that the expulsion of the cattle from the temple indicates that Jesus beat people with a whip and advised His disciples to behave in a like manner.

The opinions expressed by these writers, especially by H. N. and G. D. H., are quite correct, but unfortunately they do not reply to the question Christ put to men, but to another question, which has been substituted for it by those chief and most

every conscious compromise is such a lowering) cannot, for any purpose, be advantageous.

I am so alarmed at those customary, pernicious compromises, which deprive life of all its significance, that I challenge this foe everywhere, and attack him, especially when I hear considerations as to the apparent utility we attain. It always seems to me that as the, definite purpose of the life of mankind is not revealed to us, neither is the true result of our actions revealed to us; but what is revealed is that which we must do for the satisfaction of the inner demands of our conscience. "*Fais ce que dois, advienne que pourra*" ("Do what you ought, happen what may").

The Figure Repeated

For man to do that which he regards as evil is not only natural, but inevitable, because, as man's life advances,—as he grows morally,—he discovers that to be evil which he used formerly to do, and he retains the habit of that evil. Man wishes to draw a straight line, but his hand trembles, and the line becomes crooked. But if a man were to say to himself, "Well, I cannot succeed with a straight line, so I will not attempt it, but will just draw where my hand leads me,"—then the result would be very dreadful.

Deviation from that which one wishes to accomplish is the inevitable condition of every activity; but the false argument as to the evil which I commit,—in the depth of my soul knowing it to be evil,—that it is good, this is very, very dangerous.

In practical life one cannot avoid inexactness, departure from the ideal; but in one's consciousness, in the ideal itself, if there be any departures it is disastrous; if, in one's imagination, at least, a straight line be not the shortest distance between two points.

and when one may not resort to violence), then I risk deviating very far from the law of Nonresistance.

So with property. If I admit—as it is repeatedly stated in the Gospels, and as it is evident from the whole of Christ’s teaching—that I may not hold property, then, even although I wear clothing which I regard as my own, as long as no one asserts his right to it, and so on, I shall be near to the law of Christ; but as soon as I admit in principle the right of property, I may very easily, in defending it, depart yet farther from the law of Nonresistance.

An example of such a deviation, or compromise, may be found in Matt. V. 22, where the words “without a cause” have been added.

No living man will ever fulfill the will of God perfectly. But because we see and know the impossibility of completely fulfilling God’s will, it does not follow that we should determine beforehand to fulfill it incompletely, partially (this is a most common and dreadful sin). But we should, on the contrary, incessantly and always strive for its complete fulfillment. “Seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all things needful will be added unto you.”

The question of utility must be altogether set aside by the Christian. No one can decide questions of utility,—who will be benefited, and in what way. Utility is beyond our power; but what we should do for the accomplishment of the Father’s will,—this we know, and this we must do.

What you say about your activity—about the necessity, or rather advantage of making certain compromises, simply in order that you may be able to continue your activity, does not convince me.

The most precious thing you possess, and that you are able to possess, is your soul, your spiritual personality, and this is also the most powerful instrument of your influence over others; therefore the lowering of your spiritual personality (and

dangerous opponents of Christianity—the so-called “orthodox” ecclesiastical authorities.

Mr. H. says, “I do not believe Nonresistance admissible as a universal rule.” H. N. says “that people’s opinion as to the practical results of the application of Christ’s teaching will depend on the extent of people’s belief in his authority.” C. M. considers “the transition stage in which we live not suited for the application of the doctrine of Nonresistance.” G. D. H. holds “that to obey the law of Nonresistance we must learn how to apply it to life.” Mrs. L., thinking that the law of Nonresistance can be fully obeyed only in the future, says the same.

All these views refer to the question, What would happen if people were all obliged to obey the law of Nonresistance? But, in the first place, it is impossible to oblige every one to accept this law. Secondly, if it were possible to do so, such compulsion would in itself be a direct negation of the very principle set up. Oblige all men to refrain from violence! Who then should enforce the decision? Thirdly, and this is the chief point, the question as put by Christ is not at all, Can Nonresistance become a general law for humanity? but, How must each man act to fulfill his allotted task, to save his soul, and to do the will of God?—which are all really one and the same thing.

Christian teaching does not lay down laws for everybody, and does not say to people, “You, all, for fear of punishment, must obey such and such rules, and then you will all be happy”; but it explains to each individual his position in relation to the world, and lets him see what results, for him individually, inevitably flow from that relation. Christianity says to man (and to each man separately) that his personal life can have no rational meaning if he counts it as belonging to himself, or as having for its aim worldly happiness for himself or for other people. This is so because the happiness he seeks is unattainable: (1) for as all beings strive after worldly advantages, the gain of one is the loss of others; and it is most probable that each individual will incur much superfluous suffering in the

course of his vain efforts to seize unattainable blessing; (2) because even if a man gets worldly advantages, the more he obtains the less they satisfy him, and the more he hankers after fresh ones; (3) and chiefly because the longer a man lives, the more inevitable becomes the approach of old age, sickness, and of death, destroying all possibility of worldly advantages.

So that if man considers his life his own, to be spent in seeking worldly happiness for himself as well as for others, then that life can have no rational explanation for him. Life has a rational meaning only when one understands that to consider our life our own, or to see its aim in worldly happiness for ourselves or for other people—is a delusion; that a man's life does not belong to him who has received it, but to Him who has given it, and therefore its object should be not the attainment of worldly happiness either for one's self or for other individuals, but solely to fulfill the will of Him who created this life.

This conception alone gives life a rational meaning, and makes its aim (which is to fulfill the will of God) attainable. And, most important of all, only when enlightened by this conception does man see clearly the right direction for his own activity. Man is then no longer destined to suffer and to despair, as was inevitable under the former conception.

“The universe and I in it,” says a man of this conception to himself, “exist by the will of God. I cannot know the whole of the universe (for in its immensity it transcends my comprehension), nor can I know my own position in it, but I do know with certainty what God, who has sent me into the world (infinite in time and space, and therefore incomprehensible to me), demands from me. This is revealed to me (1) by the collective wisdom of the best men who have gone before me, *i.e.* by tradition, (2) by my own reason, and (3) by my heart, *i.e.* by the highest aspiration of my nature.

Tradition (the collective wisdom of my greatest forerunners) tells me that I should do unto others as I would that they should do unto me.

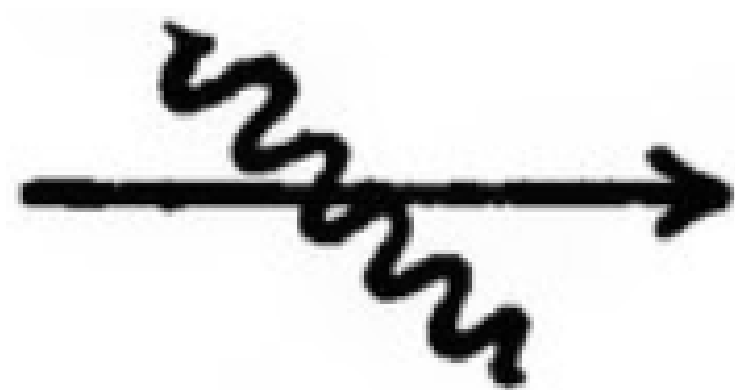
i.e. there appears a double confusion in the life. Let us suppose that I know and believe that I may never and nowhere possess any kind of property, and so also with regard to violence, the desertion of my wife, bodily impurity, etc., and I live on and on, and, judging by my past experience and my observation of others, I foresee that I shall not prevail in all, but shall sin; yet I hope, pray God, and am determined to go straight; I wish to go straight, but I *sin*; this appears as sin, I know it as such, and repent of it, but I am guilty of no compromise, no *deception* before God.

Deception would be much worse than sin, it would be blasphemy against the Holy Ghost. And the reason is evident. From the former I shall suffer alone, and my suffering will be to my profit, will, hour by hour, day by day (and one probably experiences this on looking back), draw me nearer to God; whereas from the latter others will suffer, and both they and I shall depart farther and farther from Him.

I repeat, in practice the theory or ideal is never perfectly fulfilled; in other words, that man never attains perfection, but only approaches towards it. It is impossible to draw a mathematically straight line,—all lines are but approximations to the ideal; such incomplete fulfillment of the ideal is the inevitable condition of life, and is not sin,—everyone advances towards the ideal according to his powers.

But concession, or compromise in theory, is a great sin. If I, knowing that a straight line is a mathematical conception, try to draw one, I shall attain an approximation to a straight line; but if, seeing that it is impossible to draw a perfectly straight line, I decide that I may deviate from the ideal of the straight line, then I stray away, God knows where. It is the same with moral principles.

If, in principle, I refuse to admit my right to commit violence against men, in any case, then I approach abstinence from violence; but if I admit that one may use violence towards a madman (it is difficult to define madness, and to say when one may



My reason shows me that only by all men acting thus, is the highest happiness for all men attainable.

Only when I yield myself to that intuition of love which demands obedience to this law, is my own heart happy and at rest. And not only can I then know how to act, but I can and do discern the work, to cooperate in which my activity was designed and is required.

I cannot fathom God's whole design, for the sake of which the universe exists and lives; but the divine work which is being accomplished in this world, and in which I participate by living, is comprehensible to me.

This work is the annihilation of discord and strife among men and among all creatures, and the establishment of the highest unity and concord and love.

It is the fulfillment of the promises of the Hebrew prophet who foretold a time when all men should be taught by truth, when spears should be turned into reaping hooks, swords be beaten to plowshares, and the lion lie down with the lamb.

So that a man of Christian intelligence not only knows what he has to do, but he also understands the work he is doing.

He has to act so as to co-operate towards the establishment of the kingdom of God on earth. For this a man must obey his intuition of God's will, *i.e.* must act lovingly towards others, as he would that others should act towards him.

Thus the intuitive demands of man's soul coincide with the external aim of life, which he sees before him.

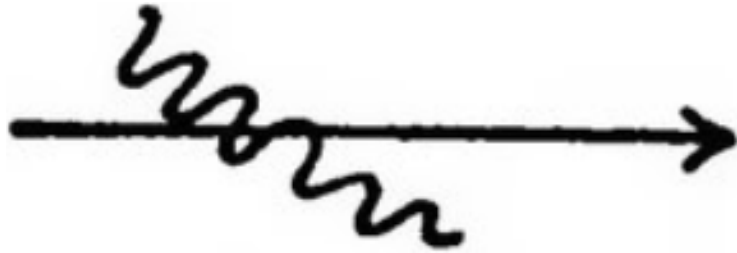
Man in this world, according to Christian teaching, is God's laborer. A laborer does not know his master's whole design, but he does know the immediate object which he is set to work at. He receives definite instructions what to do, and especially what not to do, lest he hinder the attainment of the very ends towards which his labor should tend. For the rest he has full liberty given him. And therefore for a man who has grasped the Christian conception of life, the meaning of his life is perfectly plain and reasonable, nor can he have a moment's hesitation

as to *how* he should act, or *what* he should do to fulfill the object for which he lives. And yet in spite of such a twofold indication (clear and indubitable to a man of Christian understanding) of what is the real aim and meaning of human life, and of what men should do and should not do, we find people (and people calling themselves Christians) who decide that in such and such circumstances, men ought to abandon God's law and reason's guidance and to act in opposition to them, because (according to their conception) the effects of actions performed in submission to God's law may be detrimental or inconvenient.

According to the law, contained alike in tradition, in our reason, and in our hearts, man should always do unto others as he would that they should do unto him; he should always co-operate in the development of love and union among created beings. But, on the contrary, in the judgment of these far-sighted people, as long as it is premature in their opinion to obey this law, man should do violence, imprison or kill people, and thereby evoke anger and venom instead of loving union in the hearts of men. It is as though a bricklayer, set to do a particular task, and knowing that he was co-operating with others to build a house, after receiving clear and precise instructions from the master himself how to build a certain wall, received from some fellow-bricklayers (who like himself knew neither the plan of the house, nor what would fit in with it) orders to cease building his wall, and instead rather to pull down a wall that other workmen had erected.

Astonishing delusion! A being who breathes to-day, and has vanished tomorrow, receives one definite indubitable law to guide him through the brief term of his life; but instead of obeying that law, he prefers to fancy that he knows what is necessary, advantageous, and well timed for men, and for all the world — this world which continually moves and evolves; and for the sake of some advantage (which each man pictures after his own fancy), he decides that he and other people should,

Deviation from the law (the ideal) in its application in practice is not criminal, but inevitable, and is not a compromise in the sense of something wrong. A compromise is the acknowledgment beforehand that one is at present unable to fulfill the whole law—an entirely straight line; and only such a compromise is wrong. To admit beforehand, for instance, that violence, property, religious worship, divorce, etc., are sometimes necessary, then only is it that this happens:



temporarily, abandon the indubitable law, given to him and to all men, and should act not as he would that others should act towards him, nor bring love into the world, but should do violence, imprison, kill, and bring into the world enmity whenever it seems to him profitable to do so. And he decides to act thus, though he knows that the most horrible cruelties, martyrdoms, and murders – from the inquisitions, and the murders and horrors of all the revolutions, down to the brutalities of contemporary Anarchists and their slaughter by the established authorities – have only occurred because people will imagine that they know what is necessary for mankind and for the world. But are there not always, at any given moment, two opposite parties, each of which declares that it is necessary to use force against the other? The “law-and-order” party against the Anarchist, the Anarchist against the “law-and-order” men; English against Americans, and Americans against English; Germans against English, and English against Germans, and so forth in all possible combinations and rearrangements.

A man enlightened by Christianity sees that he has no reason to abandon the law of God, given to enable him to walk sure-footedly through life, in order to follow the chance, inconstant, and often contradictory demands of men. But besides this, if he has lived a Christian life for some time, and has developed in himself a moral Christian sensibility, he literally cannot act as people demand of him. Not his reason alone, but his feeling also makes it impossible.

To many people of our society, it would be impossible to torture or kill a baby, even if they were told that by so doing they could save hundreds of other people. And in the same way a man, when he has developed a Christian sensibility of heart, finds a whole series of actions become impossible for him. For instance, a Christian who is obliged to take part in judicial proceedings in which a man may be sentenced to death, or who is obliged to take part in evictions or in debating a proposal leading to war, or to participate in preparations for war

(not to mention war itself), is in a position parallel to that of a kindly man called on to torture or to kill a baby. It is not reason alone that forbids him to do what is demanded of him; he feels instinctively that he *cannot* do it. For certain actions are morally impossible, just as others are physically impossible. As a man cannot lift a mountain, and as a kindly man cannot kill an infant, so a man living the Christian life, cannot take part in deeds of violence. Of what value, then, to him are arguments about the imaginary advantages of doing what it is morally impossible for him to do ?

But how is a man to act when he sees clearly the evil of following the law of love and its corollary law of Nonresistance? How (to use the stock example) is a man to act when he sees a robber killing or outraging a child, and he can only save the child by killing the robber?

When such a case is put, it is generally assumed that the only possible reply is that one should kill the robber to save the child. But this answer is given so quickly and decidedly, only because we are all so accustomed to the use of violence, not only to save a child, but even to prevent a neighboring government altering its frontier at the expense of ours, or some one from smuggling lace across that frontier, or even to defend our garden fruit from a passerby.

It is assumed that to save the child, the robber should be killed. But it is only necessary to consider the question, On what grounds a man (whether he be or be not a Christian) ought to act so, in order to come to the conclusion that such action has no reasonable foundation, and only seems to us necessary, because up to two thousand years ago such conduct was considered right, and a habit of acting so was formed. Why should a non-Christian, not acknowledging God, nor regarding the fulfillment of His will as the aim of life, decide to kill the robber in order to defend the child? By killing the robber he certainly kills, whereas he cannot know positively whether the robber would have killed the child or not. But letting that

(may he only not walk thus:).



pass, who shall say whether the child's life was more needed, was better, than the robber's life?

Surely if the non-Christian knows not God, nor sees life's meaning in the performance of His will, the only rule for his actions must be a reckoning, a conception, of what is more profitable for him and for all men: a continuation of the robber's life or of the child's. To decide that he needs to know what would become of the child whom he saves, and what—had he not killed him—would have been the future of the robber he kills. And as he cannot know this, the non-Christian has no sufficient rational ground for killing a robber to save a child

If a man is a Christian, and consequently acknowledges God and sees the meaning of life in fulfilling His will, then, however ferocious the robber, however innocent and lovely the child, he has even less ground to abandon the God-given law and to do to the robber what the robber wishes to do to the child. He may plead with the robber, may interpose his own body between the robber and the victim, but there is one thing he cannot do: he cannot deliberately abandon the law he has received from God, the fulfillment of which alone gives meaning to his life. Very probably bad education, or his animal nature, may cause a man (Christian or non-Christian) to kill the robber, not only to save the child, but even to save himself or to save his purse, but it does not follow that he is right in acting thus, or that he should accustom himself or others to think such conduct right.

What it does show is that, notwithstanding a coating of education and of Christianity, the habits of the Stone Age are yet so strong in man, that he still commits actions long since condemned by his reasonable conscience.

I see a robber killing a child, and I can save the child by killing the robber — therefore in certain cases violence must be used to resist evil. A man's life is in danger, and can be saved only by my telling a lie — therefore in certain cases one must lie. A man is starving, and one can save him only by stealing — therefore in certain cases one must steal.

I lately read a story by Coppée, in which an orderly kills his officer, whose life was insured, and thereby saves the honor and the family of the officer. Therefore in certain cases one must kill. Such inventions and the deductions from them only prove that there are men who know that it is not well to steal, to lie, or to kill, but who are still so unwilling that people should cease to do these things, that they use all their mental powers to invent excuses for such conduct. There is no moral law, concerning which we may not devise a case in which it is difficult to decide what is more moral: to disobey the law or to obey it? But all such inventions fail to prove that the laws, “thou shalt not lie, steal, or kill,” are invalid.

It is the same with reference to the law of Nonresistance. People know it is wrong to use violence, but they are so anxious to continue to live a life secured by the “strong arm of the law,” that — instead of devoting their intellects to the elucidation of the evils which have flowed and are still flowing from admitting that man has a right to use violence to his fellow-men — they prefer to exert their mental powers in defense of that error.

“*Fais ce que dois, advienne que pourra*” (“*Do what’s right, come what may*”) is an expression of profound wisdom. We each can know indubitably what we ought to do — but what results will follow from our actions, we none of us either do know or can know. Therefore it follows that, besides feeling the call of duty, we are further driven to act as duty bids us, by the consideration that we have no other guidance, but are totally ignorant of what will result from our actions.

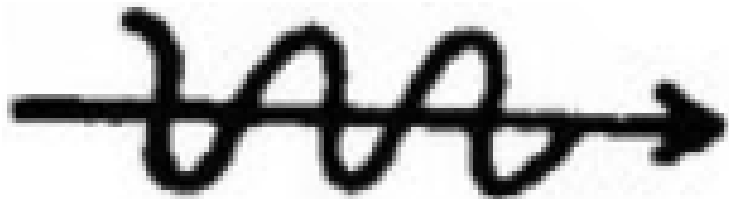
Christian teaching indicates what a man should do to perform that will of Him who sent him into life; but discussion as to what results we anticipate from such or such human actions, have nothing to do with Christianity, but are just an example of the error which Christianity eliminates.

None of us has ever yet met the imaginary robber with the imaginary child, but all the horrors which fill the annals of his-

—, it is said that he is compromising.

Even the man himself often regards it as a compromise, and is grieved by it. But a great confusion is taking place here, and in connection with the most important conceptions.

A sincere, truly-living man can never walk otherwise than thus:



tory and of our own times came and come from this one thing — that people will believe that they can foresee the results of hypothetical future actions.

The case is this: People once lived an animal life, and violated or killed whom they thought well to violate or to kill. They even ate each other; and public opinion approved of it.

Thousands of years ago, as far back as the times of Moses, a day came when people had realized that to violate or kill each other is bad. But there were people for whom the reign of force was advantageous, and these did not approve of the change, but assured themselves and others that to do deeds of violence and to kill people is not always bad, but that there are circumstances when it is necessary and even moral. And violence and even slaughter, though not so frequent or so cruel as before, continued, only with this difference, that those who committed or commended such acts, excused themselves by pleading that they did it for the benefit of humanity.

It was just this sophisticated justification of violence that Christ denounced. When two enemies fight, each may think his own conduct justified by the circumstances. Excuses can be made for every use of violence; and no infallible standard has ever been discovered by which to measure the worth of these excuses. Therefore Christ taught not to believe in any excuse for violence, and (contrary to what had been taught by them of old time) never to use violence.

One would have thought that those who professed Christianity would have been indefatigable in exposing deception in this matter, for in such exposure lay one of the chief manifestations of Christianity. What really happened was just the reverse. People who profited by violence, and who did not wish to give up their advantages, took on themselves a monopoly of Christian preaching, and declared that as cases can be found in which Nonresistance causes more harm than the use of violence (the imaginary robber killing the imaginary child), therefore Christ's doctrine of Nonresistance need not always be fol-

lowed, and that one may deviate from his teaching to defend one's life or the life of others; to defend one's country; to save society from lunatics or criminals; and in many other cases. The decision of the question, In what cases should Christ's teaching be set aside? was left to the very people who employed violence. So that it ended by Christ's teaching on the subject of not resisting evil by violence being completely annulled. And what was worst of all, was that the very people Christ denounced came to consider themselves the sole preachers and expositors of his doctrines. But the light shines through the darkness, and Christ's teaching is again exposing the pseudo-teachers of Christianity.

We may think about rearranging the world to suit our own taste; no one can prevent that, and we may try to do what seems to us pleasant or profitable, and with that object treat our fellow-creatures with violence, on the pretext that we are doing good. But acting thus, we cannot pretend to follow Christ's teaching, for Christ denounced just this deception. Truth sooner or later reappears, and the false teachers are shown up, which is just what is happening to-day.

Only let the question of man's life be rightly put, as Christ put it, and not as it has been perversely put by the Churches, and the whole structure of falsehood which the Churches have built over Christ's teaching will collapse of itself.

The real question is not whether it will be good or bad for a certain human society that people should follow the law of Love and the consequent law of Nonresistance, but it is this, Do you, who to-day live and tomorrow will die (who are indeed tending deathward every moment), do you wish now, immediately and entirely, to obey the law of Him who sent you into life, and who clearly showed you His will, alike in tradition and in your mind and heart; or do you prefer to resist His will? And as soon as the question is put thus, only one reply is possible — I wish now, this moment, without delay or hesitation, to the very utmost of my strength, neither waiting for anyone, nor

On Compromise.

It is always said, when a man has not attained that after which he has been striving, when he has not drawn a straight line, precisely the shortest between two points, or even when he has drawn quite a crooked and broken line, instead of a straight one, thus:

But, above all—above all, I say to you from soul to soul, dear friend, the chief aim, infinite, joyful, always attainable, and worthy of the powers which are given us, is the increase of love.

And increase of love is attainable by one definite effort; by the cleansing of one's soul from all that is personal, lustful, inimical. "The human soul is Christian," it has been said; *i.e.* love is not only natural to it, but its very essence is love; and therefore in order to strengthen, augment love, it is only necessary to cleanse the soul, to polish it, like a glass for collecting rays. The more polished and clean it is, the more powerfully will it transmit and focus the light and warmth of love.

And this work has no end, no obstacles, its joy is unlimited, and there is nothing good, nothing that a man *should* do which does not enter as a part into this work,—the work of cleansing one's soul and thus increasing love.

You know this, dear friend, you know this joy, for you have been advancing along this way, and are at present probably advancing, in the depth of your consciousness. I, for my part, the nearer I approach to bodily death the clearer I see this and recognize it, not only in contemplation but in actual experience. I am learning—not only towards living men who are present, but towards those absent, and towards animals, towards dead people—to repress in myself every shade of contempt, irony, irritation, not to speak of animosity; and it is wonderful how in the measure of one's attainment of this one is recompensed by lucidity of thought, by joy of life, by fruitfulness, adaptiveness of labor.

In this work, you probably know this—ill-feeling towards one man paralyzes the powers of life in the same way as ill-feeling, hatred, towards the whole human race. The glass is dimmed, and does not transmit light owing to one piece of dirt as well as to a whole barrowful.

counting the cost, to do that which alone is clearly demanded by Him, who sent me into the world; and on no account and under no conditions do I wish to, or can I, act otherwise, for herein lies my only possibility of a rational and unharassed life.

Letter to a Private Friend

To a Private Friend.¹

No! dear friend, you are not right; not in what you say, but in *how* you say it.

Do what you like, how you like, yet one thing only is necessary to God, to man, and to myself—it is that I should have a heart free from condemnation, contempt, irritation, irony, animosity towards men. And the devil take all this manual labor if it removes my heart from men, and does not draw me closer to them; it would be better, like a Buddhist, to go about with a bowl, begging.

But it is not for me to write this to you, for as you say when writing to me, so I say to you—you know all this better than I do. And you know that you have an ill-feeling toward our mutual friend, and this is wrong, and occasions you pain.

Yes, it *is* necessary that the truth should prevail. This is most important, and God knows it, and has put us into such conditions that we cannot escape from the truth; we cannot escape physical and yet less moral sufferings, neither can we escape death. And we are all *in* this truth, and our friend also, and one cannot say about anyone that he is in falsehood. To say that he is in falsehood is the same as to say that he is in the mire, and to therefore abandon him. If he be in the mire, then so much

¹ The person here addressed, desiring "to get off the back of the workers" had greatly simplified his life, and had begun to work with his own hands; but had then fallen into the common errors, self-satisfaction, and contempt of all other reformers who did not adopt his position; and particularly of one.—*Note by Ed.*

the more should we pity and cleanse him ; he cannot like it any more than any of us.

You say that “where two or three are gathered in My name” there alone is life. Not so. Life is also in him who for twenty-five years has been sitting alone in prison, and on a tower.

But this is neither here nor there; what I want to say above all is this —The *living* man is he who continues advancing in the direction illuminated by the lantern which advances in front of him, and who never attains the limit of the illuminated space continually receding before him. This is life, and there is no other. And only in this life is there no death, because the lantern illuminates the hereafter, and one follows it there with the same peace one does during the whole of life. But if a man veils the lamp, and directs its rays to the space immediately around or behind him, but not in front of him, and ceases to advance, then there will be cessation of life.

Pardon me, my friend, and accept this with the same love with which I am writing it: I am afraid that having attained that which your lamp has for so long been showing, you have ceased to carry it in front of you. God forbid. Why, this is the eternal deception. As we continually wish to achieve something external, to accomplish some definite purpose, so also do we continue to wish to attain the best position and to establish ourselves in it; but as it is impossible as well as unnecessary to accomplish any definite purpose, but only necessary to adapt one’s powers in the best way to God’s eternal work — so also can there be no position either better or worse, but every position is only a certain result at a certain time, of my relation to God’s work, and there cannot be any one permanent position; your present position is neither more nor less justifiable than the one you were in when you lived in T—, and it will certainly be replaced by another one.

Take care, old fellow! Do not get angry with me, and do not fire a charge at me as you did at our friend, but on the contrary reconcile yourself to him.

A Further Letter to the same Friend

I wrote to you in a bad weak state of mind, and therefore both what I wrote was not clear and I did not come to the chief point I was driving at. The point was this—

In order to live it is absolutely necessary to advance in a work in which there is no end, and in the accomplishment of which there are no obstacles. And there is only one such work: perfection in love. Manual labor in certain conditions is only *in some cases* the result of love. Such labor and restricted economical are the results, and therefore the verification, of true life; the absence of labor and an elevated assured economical position demonstrate the insincerity and untruthfulness and weakness of the man. The contrary of this has, therefore, a negative significance, but no positive significance.

The idolatry of labor is a dangerous error and a most habitual one.

Prayer, as the result of one’s aspiration towards God, is a most lawful act; but when it becomes an aim in itself, it produces ritual, which kills the moral life.

Mercy, help afforded one’s neighbor as the result of love to God, is a most lawful thing ; but when it becomes an aim in itself, it produces philanthropy.

Want, poverty, absence of property, as the result of abstinence from violent resistance and of renunciation of independent means, is a most lawful state; but when it is placed as a necessary condition, as an aim in itself, it produces the formal poverty of Buddhists and of monks.

It is the same with manual labor. Such labor as the result of the renunciation of independent means and of the desire to serve others, is a lawful thing, but if it becomes an aim in itself, it will inevitably lead to evil.²

² See also Tolstoy’s letter on “Communal life” in *Some Social Remedies*, uniform with this.—*Note by Ed.*