

Reason, Faith, and Prayer

THREE LETTERS

BY

Leo Tolstoy

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THREE LETTERS.

I.— Reason.

YOU ask me what my Christian creed is. You have read my "Short Exposition of the Gospels," and you know, therefore, how I understand the teaching of Jesus.

If, however, you wish to know what I consider the essential meaning of the teaching: in my opinion the essential meaning, which I should like to transmit to all mankind, and in which I wish all children could be educated, consists in this, that *man has come into the world not by his own will but by the will of Him that sent him*. And in order that man should know what He who sent him into this world requires, He has imparted reason, by the help of which a man, if he truly desire it, can always know the will of God—he can always know what He who sent him into the world requires of him.

The Pharisees and Scribes of our time always say that one should not believe in reason, because it will deceive, but that one should believe them, and they will not deceive. But they say what is untrue. If one believes in men, and, as the Gospels say, "in the traditions of men," then we shall all crawl astray from each other like blind puppies, and hate each other, as we do now:—the Christian Churchman hates the Mohammedan, the Mohammedan hates the Christian, and the Christians themselves hate each other; the (Greek) Orthodox hates the Catholic, the Old Believer¹ hates the Orthodox, and so on; — if we adhere to that which our reason tells us, we shall all unite, because reason is one and the same for all, and reason alone unites men and does not hinder the manifestation of the mutual love natural to men.

Reason unites us, not only with our contemporaries, but with men who have lived two thousand years before us, and with those who will live after us. Thus we profit by all that has been produced by the reason of Isaiah, and Jesus, and Buddha, and Socrates, and Confucius, and of all men who have lived before us and believed in reason and served it. "Act towards others as thou wouldst wish them to act towards thee ; do not revenge thyself against those who do evil unto thee, but return good for evil ; be abstinent, chaste ; not only refrain from killing people but be not angry against them ; keep peace with all," and much else. All this is the product of reason, and all this has been preached equally by Buddhists, Confucianists, Christians, Taoists, and the Greek and the Egyptian sages. It is also preached by all good people of our time, and all agree with it.

And, therefore, I repeat, the chief meaning of the Christian teaching consists, in my opinion, in what is expressed in the Gospels, in the parable of the Workmen in the Vineyard, for whose use a garden had been given under condition of a payment to the owner, but who imagined it their own ; and in the parable of the Talents, where the meaning is that men

¹An ancient Russian sect. — TRANS.

must fulfil the will of Him who sent them into life, which will consists in men becoming perfect, "as their Heavenly Father," as it is said in another place — i.e., in approaching as near as they can to supreme perfection.

That the will of God is only in this is also demonstrated to us by reason, and so clearly that there can be no dissension nor doubt. Every man who has thought of it cannot but see that in all the undertakings of life man can and does meet obstacles, and that only in this work (perfection) does man meet no obstacle ; that is, in perfecting himself, clearing his soul from evil, and doing good to all that lives. Neither is this work arrested, destroyed, nor hindered by death, which stops, destroys, and renders meaningless all other worldly undertakings. Death neither arrests nor destroys this work, because the man who fulfils the will of Him who sent him, knowing that what he does is necessary to the Master, peacefully performs it here as long as he has the power, and knows that death destroys neither himself nor his relation to the Master, but that "there" also, although in quite different form, he will be in the same dependence on the Master, and have the same joy of a continually growing participation in the life and the work of the Master, i.e., God.

Thus do I understand the teaching of Jesus ; thus would I wish it to be understood by all ; and in this I wish all children could be educated. Not to blindly believe the things told them about God and life, and to believe the things they do believe, not because they are told they are the utterances of prophets, or Christ, but because their reason tells them they are true. Reason is older and more reliable than all the writings and all the traditions. It existed even when there were no traditions and no writings, and it is given to each of us direct from God.

The Gospel statement that all sins shall be pardoned except the sin against the Holy Ghost, in my opinion refers directly to the assertion that one should not believe in reason. Really, if we do not believe in the reason given us from God, in what shall we believe? Are we to believe, indeed, in those very men who wish to compel us to accept what is inconsistent with the reason given us from God ?

II.— Faith.

You ask, what will give a weak degenerated man, depraved (as we all are) amidst the snares surrounding him on all sides—what will give such a man the power to live a Christian life?

Instead of answering and before answering this question, I will ask you, What does it exactly mean?

We have become so accustomed to the question that it appears quite natural and intelligible, whereas it is not only not natural and not intelligible, but exceedingly strange and curious, for every rational man not educated in the superstitions of the Church faith.

Why doesn't the smith hammering iron, or the peasant ploughing the field, ask where he will obtain the strength to do the work he has undertaken, but instead does it to the

best of his strength, makes mistakes, tries to correct them, becomes tired, halts, leaves his work for a time, rests, and again betakes himself to it? Is not every servant of God in the same position, when trying to live the Christian life, to fulfil the will of God he has become conscious of? Just in the same way such a man, if he be sincere, will live a Christian life to the best of his strength—do the will of God, and if he makes mistakes will correct himself, will become tired, and rest, and again betake himself to the same life-work—that of approaching to the best of his strength that perfection of the Heavenly Father indicated to him.

The question as to where one should get the strength for the Christian life only shows that someone has persuaded men that certain means exist, by whose aid men, without their own incessant efforts, strife, without falls, repentance, upheavals, again falls, and again upheavals, can obtain the necessary strength for a good, saintly life. It is this very superstition, that man doesn't approach perfection by his own slow efforts, but can purify himself all at once and become a saint, which is one of the most dreadful and pernicious errors,—and it is this which is strenuously preached by all the Churches. Some assure their disciples that through the sacraments of baptism, confession, communion, man is freed from sin ; others affirm that one is freed from sin by faith in the redemption, because the Christ-God has purified us with his blood. Both the one and the other teach that besides this we are purified by petitionary prayer to God that He should pardon our sins and make us good—and not that we should ourselves strive to become better.

This superstition is very pernicious because it contains a deceit.

The deceit consists, firstly, in the supposition that man can become quite pure and saintly ; whereas for a living man this is impossible. Man cannot be perfect and sinless ; he can only more or less *approach* perfection, regarding this approach as the sole meaning of his life. I even think that life after death will again consist only in advance towards perfection, although in a completely different form. In this personal effort towards perfection lies the whole meaning and joy of life. And therefore if perfection were attainable by external means we should be deprived of the very essence of life.

A deceit, secondly, because through it man's efforts are withdrawn from the thing he has to do—from improving himself—and are directed towards something unnecessary. To rely on sacraments, or belief in the redemption, or prayer, contributing to the perfecting of oneself, is like a smith, while holding in his hands the iron and the hammer, and possessing an anvil and a well-lighted fire, trying to devise some other means of forging the iron besides striking it with the hammer, or praying to God to give him the strength to do the work.

One might pray to God, and devise other means for perfecting oneself, only in the event of obstacles being put before us in this work, and if we ourselves had not the strength for it. But in this work of perfecting oneself, or the Christian life, or the fulfilment of the will of God, God does not demand of us something we cannot do, — on the contrary He has taken care to give us all we are in need of for fulfilling His will.

We are here in this world as in a wayside inn in which the master has arranged everything really needful to us travellers, and has gone away himself leaving instructions how we should behave in this temporary shelter. All that we require is within our reach! Then what

other means should we devise, and for what should we pray? We have only *to obey our instructions!* So also in our spiritual life: all that we require is given us, and the rest is in our own hands.

It is clear that if we wish to become saints all of a sudden, or to feel ourselves justified, and desire besides this to be rich—if we desire that our friends and ourselves shall not be subject to disease or to death, and that we shall always have good harvests, and that our foes shall be destroyed—then we, too, must ask all this of God as it is done in our churches.

But God has not destined us to anything of this kind. He not only has not ordained us to be perfectly righteous and sinless, but on the contrary He has given us a life the meaning of which consists only in our liberating ourselves from our sins, and so *approaching* towards Him. And He has not destined us to be rich, diseaseless, and deathless, but has given us trials in the form of poverty, disease, the death of our friends and of ourselves—for the very purpose of teaching us to centre our lives not in wealth, health, and this temporary existence, but in serving Him. And He has given us foes not in order that we should desire their ruin, but that we should learn to overcome them by love. He has given us a law of such a nature that it is always well with us if we fulfil it.

So that we have no need to invent any special means of salvation, nor to ask God for anything. All that we require is given us, if only we follow the instructions both of our conscience, and of God as expressed in the Gospels.

The third deceit, an especially pernicious one, consists in this, that the people who have come to believe that they cannot fulfil the will of God and live well by their own efforts, cease to labour at self-improvement ; and not only this, but they lose the possibility of self-perfection. A man need only persuade himself that he cannot do something he has to do, and his hands become helpless, and he will indeed be unable to do what is necessary. A man need only become persuaded that he is ill, and he will be ill. Hysterical subjects feel impelled to scream because they believe they are forced to scream. Habitual drunkards do not recover, because they are persuaded they cannot abstain. There is no more immoral and pernicious teaching than that man cannot perfect himself by his own efforts.

This argument, that for a good Christian life one's own efforts are insufficient, and that some kind of external power is necessary, is like the assertion that reason is not sufficient to obtain knowledge of the truth, but that external indubitable proofs are necessary, which I mentioned in my first letter. In the former case, it is supposed beforehand that something or other exists which will give man the power to live a Christian life and to fulfil the will of God. In the latter case, it is supposed that something exists by which a man can ascertain positively that what he is told is the absolute truth. It is supposed that some kind of means exists for ascertaining truth, independently of one's personal exertions of reason, and that, complete and absolute truth. But this is as impossible as it is to see the light without eyes. Truth is that which is ascertained by effort, and which cannot be ascertained by any other means. And truth which is ascertained by man's reason can never be perfect, but can only more or less approximate to absolute truth. So that "truth" may be the highest truth accessible to man at a given time, but it can never be absolute and positive truth for all times. No proposition can be all absolute truth for all time, were it only for this, that the

life of all mankind, as well as that of individual man, is engaged in, and even consists of, the attainment of more and more perfect truth.

The erroneous and absurd idea that human reason cannot by its own efforts approach the Truth, proceeds from the same kind of dreadful superstition as the one according to which man cannot approach the fulfilment of the will of God without external help. The essence of this superstition consists in the supposition that the complete, perfect truth has presumably been revealed by God Himself: to the Jews it was revealed on Mount Sinai, and then by various prophets ; to Christians—by Christ, the Apostles, the Councils, the Church ; to the Brahmins, in the Vedas ; to the Buddhists, in the Tripitaka; to the Mohammedans, in the Koran.

This superstition is dreadful, firstly, because it distorts the very idea of truth ; secondly, because once one has recognised as certain truth all the absurdities and horrors which are accepted as the revelation of God in the Scriptures, one has to keep on distorting common sense more and more in order to justify all these horrors and absurdities ; and thirdly, because having accepted an infallible, external revelation as the source of truth, man ceases to believe in the only means to the knowledge of truth—the exertion of his reason. The man who acts thus is like one who, in search of a road, instead of exerting himself to the utmost to find it, shuts his eyes and surrenders to the guidance of the first stranger who offers to show him the way.

It is said, "How can one believe in reason when we see the people who are guided by it fall into error? Protestants, guided by reason, split up into numberless faiths, and even one and the same man trusting himself to reason, passes from one teaching to another. Therefore," it is said, "reason may be mistaken, and one cannot trust it."

But why so? When man believed in one Something, and his reason pointed out nothing more true, he was conscious of the highest truth accessible to him, and was right. Then he became conscious of a higher truth, and was right in acknowledging IT. So also was he right when he became conscious of a yet higher and purer truth. The highest, clearest, truest, which man can see and contemplate, that is for him the Truth.

It may be well and desirable, very possibly, that all men should suddenly recognise one and the same Perfect Truth (although if this were so life would cease), but even were we to admit that this might be desirable,— things do not occur as we would like. It might be very desirable (to unreasonable people) that man should not suffer sicknesses, or that some means should exist which should cure him from all diseases ; or that all men should speak the same tongue. But this will not take place merely because we imagine that all men can be cured by our remedy, or that all men can speak and understand Russian. If we do imagine this we only make things worse for ourselves, just as we only make it worse for ourselves when we imagine that the complete and eternal truth is revealed to us in the Scriptures, in tradition, or in the Church.

This might have been imagined at the beginning of Christianity, when one faith appeared possible ; but in our time, when by our sides we can see people of the most various religions all imagining that the complete and eternal Truth is revealed to them and not to us—to imagine that precisely we, who have been born in our faith, possess the complete Truth,

as the Buddhists, Mohammedans, Catholics, Taoists, and others imagine— is especially foolish.

So mistaken an idea is especially harmful, because it disunites men more than anything else. Men ought to go on uniting closer and closer, as Jesus teaches, and as our reason and heart indicate. But dogmas about "revelations" *disunite* men more and more.

Besides this, one should understand also that if man believes in revelation he believes so only because reason has told him that he should believe in such or such a revelation—the Mohammedan, Buddhist, or Christian. Whether we desire it or not, no truth can enter man's mind independently of his reason. Reason is like the sieves attached to the threshing machines, so that one cannot get the grain otherwise than through the sieve. It may be that chaff has passed and still passes through the sieve, but there is no other way of getting the grain. And if we imagine that we can have pure grain without sifting, then we deceive ourselves, and fill ourselves with chaff instead of bread, as Churchmen do.

So that we should not imagine everything is happening as we would like, but remember that everything follows laws established by God. And human life has been so ordained by God that men cannot grasp the whole truth, but are continually approaching it ; and by comprehending it more and more clearly they are mutually more and more being drawn together.

You ask my opinion about the person of Jesus ; whether I regard him as God ; about his birth ; future life ; about whom I understand by Scribes and Pharisees, and about the holy communion.

I regard Jesus as the same kind of man we all are, and I believe it to be the greatest sacrilege and an evident proof of heathenism, to regard him as God. To consider Jesus as God is to renounce God.

Jesus I regard as man, but his teaching I regard as Divine, in so far as it expresses Divine truths. I know no higher teaching. It has given me life, and I try as far as I can to follow it.

About the birth of Jesus I know nothing, nor do I need to know.

About future life we know that it does exist, that life does not end with death. As to what that life will be it is not given us to know, because it is not necessary to us.

By Pharisees I mean principally the priesthood. By Scribes I mean men of science who do not believe in God.

Concerning the eating of the body and the drinking of the blood, I think this passage in the Gospel the least important, and that it signifies either imbibing the teaching, or a commemoration, but that neither in the one case nor the other has it any importance ; nor does it signify what the Church fanatics understand by it. I have expressed my understanding of this passage as well as I could in the "Short Exposition of the Gospels." (*Gospel in Brief.*)

III.—Prayer.

In my last letter I wrote about the futility of prayer, in respect both to the realisation of our desires concerning events of the external world, and also to the inner world, for perfecting oneself.

I am afraid that owing to my own fault you will not understand me as I would wish, and I will add here, therefore, some thoughts on the subject of prayer.

One cannot pray for external events, such as that: it might rain, or that an individual loved by me might remain alive, or that I should keep healthy and not die, for these events occur according to laws established by God once for all, and so established that if we act as we should they are always beneficial. It is just the same as if a good man has built a house with substantial walls and roof, which shelter me, and I capriciously desire to enlarge or alter the position of the walls, and ask for this.

As to one's inner perfection, one cannot for this because everything necessary for it has been given us, and it is neither possible nor needful to add anything more.

But because petitionary prayer has no meaning, it does not follow that one cannot or should not pray. On the contrary, I believe it is impossible to live well without prayer, and that prayer is the necessary condition of a good, peaceful, and happy life. It is indicated in the Gospel how one should pray, and of what prayer should consist.

In every man there is the divine spark, the spirit of God. Every man is the son of God. Prayer consists in calling forth in oneself the divine element, while renouncing all that is of this world, all which can distract one's feelings. (Mohammedans do very well when they shut their eyes and ears with their fingers on entering their mosques or beginning to pray.) The best method is the one Jesus teaches. To enter alone into one's chamber and lock the door, i.e., to pray in complete solitude, whether in a room, a wood, or a field.

Prayer consists in renouncing all that is of this world, external, and evoking in oneself the divine part of one's soul by throwing oneself into it, entering by it communion with Him of whom It is a part ; to recognise oneself as the slave of God ; and to test one's self, one's actions, one's desires, according to the demands not of the external circumstances of the world but of this divine part of one's soul.

And such prayer is not an idle sentimentality and excitement such as is produced by public prayer, with the accompanying singing, images, illuminations, and exhortations—but is always a help to life, reforming and directing it.

Such a prayer is a confession, a test of one's past actions, and an indication of the direction of one's future actions. Suppose I have been insulted and have an ill-feeling towards the man, and desire evil to him, or do not wish to do him the good I could ; or else suppose I have lost my property, or a dear one ; or am living and acting not in accordance with my faith. If I do not pray in the right way, but continue to live superficially, I shall not be delivered from the painful feeling of ill-will to the one who has insulted me. So also the loss of property or of the dear one will poison my life. And preparing to act contrary to the demands of my conscience, I shall feel uneasy. But if I test myself before my soul

and before God, all will change. I shall condemn *myself*, not my enemy, and shall search for an opportunity of doing good to him ; my losses I shall accept as a trial, and try to bear submissively. And thus I shall find consolation, and shall see my way clearer for my actions ;—shall not, as before, conceal from myself the inconsistency between my life and my faith, but shall endeavour with repentance to bring them into harmony; and in this effort I shall find peace and joy.

But, you ask, in what should prayer consist? Jesus has given us a model prayer in "Our Father" and this prayer, reminding us of the essence of our life (which consists in being in accordance with the will of the Father and obeying it), and of our most usual sins : condemnation, or not forgiving one's brothers; and above all, of the dangers or snares of our lives—this remains until the present time the best prayer, and the most complete, of all which I know.

But besides this prayer, true solitary prayer also consists of all which in the words of other wise and righteous men, or in one's own, brings the soul back to the consciousness of its divine source, to a more vivid and clear expression of the demands of one's conscience, i.e., of one's divine nature. Prayer is a test of one's present and past actions according to the highest demands of the soul.

So that I not only do not reject solitary prayer, which re-establishes the divinity of the soul, but I regard it on the contrary as a necessary condition of spiritual (true) life. I reject petitionary prayer, and public prayer with its singing, images, candles, and even theatricalities, as sacrilegious. I often wonder how this public and petitionary prayer can exist among men calling themselves Christians, when Jesus clearly and decidedly said that one should pray in solitude, and that you should not ask for anything, because before you open your mouth "Your Father in heaven knoweth what ye need."

As to myself I will say—without at all thinking that this is good for all, and that all ought to do so—that I have long ago contracted the habit of praying in solitude every morning, and that this my daily prayer is as follows:—

Our Father who art in Heaven, hallowed be Thy name. And after this I add, from the Gospel of John : Thy name is love, God is love. He who abides in love abides in God, and God in him. No man hath seen God anywhere, but if we love one another then He abides in us, and His love is fulfilled in us. If any man say "I love God" but hateth his brother, he is a liar, for he that loveth not his brother whom he sees, how can he love God who he hath not seen? Brothers, let us love one another; love is from God, and every man that loveth is from God and knoweth God, because God is love.

Thy Kingdom Come. And I add : Seek ye the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all the rest will be added unto you. The Kingdom of God is within you.

Thy will be done on earth as it is in Heaven. And here I ask myself whether I really believe that I am in God and God in me? And do I believe that my life consists in increasing love in myself? I ask, do I remember that to-day I am alive, and to-morrow dead? Is it true that I do not wish to live for personal desires and human glory, but only for the fulfilment of the will of God? And I add the words of Jesus from the three Gospels: Not my will, but Thine; and not what I desire but what Thou desirest. And not as I desire but as Thou

desirest.

Give us this day our daily bread. I add: My food consists in doing the will of Him that sent me, and completing it. Deny thyself, take up thy cross for each day, and follow me. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me, for I am meek and humble in heart, and you will find peace for your soul. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light.

And forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us. I add: And your Father will not forgive you your sins unless each one of you forgive his brother who has sinned against him.

And lead us not into temptation. I add: Beware of the temptations of the flesh, of ambition, of ill-will, of gluttony, adultery, human glory. Do not give your alms before men, but so that your right hand does not know what your left is doing. And he is not meet for the kingdom of God who having taken the plough looks back. Rejoice when thou art abused and humiliated.

But deliver us from evil. I add: Beware of what issues from the heart: evil thoughts, murders (every ill-will towards men), thefts (profiting by what one has not earned), adultery (even in thought), false witness, slander.

I conclude the prayer again with the words of the Gospel of John. "And we know that we have passed from death into life if we love our brother. He that loveth not his brother has not eternal life abiding in him.

So do I daily pray, adapting the words of this prayer to my actions and my spiritual state.

But besides this prayer I pray when I am alone with myself. I read the thoughts of wise and righteous men, not only Christian and not only ancient; and reflect, searching out before God the evil in my heart, and trying to extract it. I also endeavour to pray during the daily round of my life when I am with men and passions are getting hold of me. It is in these cases I try to recall to mind all that took place in my soul during my solitary prayer; and the more sincere that prayer was, the easier it is to refrain from evil.

This is all I wished to tell you about prayer, in order that you should not think I reject it.

Your brother,
LEO TOLSTOY.

January, 1901.

A series of letters from Tolstoy to a friend of his, translated and published by The Free Age Press. The author goes over his personal understanding of religion, the role of reason in finding truth, traps in religious practice and how we all should be aware that *"man has come into the world not by his own will but by the will of Him that sent him."* which is his basis to understanding man's purpose, Jesus, Religion and Prayer.



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