

WHAT A CHRISTIAN MAY DO, AND WHAT NOT

by Leo Tolstoy

Translated from the Original Russian and edited by Leo Wiener
Assistant Professor of Slavic Languages at Harvard University

1887

One thousand eight hundred and eighty years ago a new law was revealed to men by Jesus Christ. By His life and His death Christ showed to men what he who wants to be His disciple, a Christian, may do, and what not.

According to Christ's teaching, the sons of the Father are free (Matt. xvii. 26), for they know the truth, and the truth shall make them free (John viii. 32). Christ's teaching was then, even as it is now, contrary to the teaching of the world. According to the teaching of the world, the powers govern the nations, and, to govern them, compel some people to kill, execute, punish others, and to swear that they will in everything do the will of the rulers. According to Christ's teaching, a man not only cannot kill another, but even cannot do violence to him, or resist him with force : he can not do evil to his neighbour, nor even to his enemy.

The teaching of the world and of Christ have always been and always will be opposed to each other. Christ knew this, and said this to His disciples, and predicted to them that He Himself would suffer and that they, too, would be delivered to be afflicted and killed (Matt xxiv. 9), and that the world would hate them, because they

would not be the servants of the world, but of the Father (John xv. 19, 20).

And every thing came to pass as Jesus had predicted. The world hated Him and tried to ruin Him. All, the Pharisees, and the Sadducees, and the scribes, and the Herodians, rebuked Him for being an enemy to Cæsar, for prohibiting men from paying tribute to him, for disturbing and corrupting the world. They said that He was an evildoer, that He made Himself a king, and so was an enemy of Cæsar (John xix. 12).

Even before He was delivered up to be put to death, they, watching Him, sent cunning men up to Him, to catch Him in some utterance, so as to deliver Him up to the authorities and the power of the ruler. And they asked Him:

Master, we know that Thou art true, and teachest the way of God in truth, neither carest Thou for any man : for Thou regardest! not the person of men. Tell us therefore, What thinkest Thou ? Is it lawful to give tribute unto Cæsar, or not ? But Jesus perceived their wickedness, and said, Why tempt ye me, ye hypocrites ? Shew me the

tribute money. And they brought unto Him a penny. And He saith unto them, Whose is this image and superscription ? They say unto Him, Cæsar's. Then saith He unto them, Render therefore unto Cæsar the things which are Cæsar's ; and unto God the things that are God's. When they had heard these words, they marvelled at His answer, and grew silent.

They had expected Him to say, either that it is lawful and necessary to pay tribute to Cæsar, and that thus He would destroy His whole teaching about the sons being free, about a man being obliged to live like the birds of the air, not caring for the morrow, and many similar things; or that He would say that it is not lawful to pay tribute to Cæsar, and that thus He would show Himself to be an enemy to Cæsar. But Christ said, Unto Cæsar the things which are Cæsar's, and unto God the things which are God's. He said more than they had expected of Him. He defined everything, dividing everything a man has into two parts, – into the human and the divine, and said that what is man's may be given to man, and what is God's cannot be given to man, but only to God ; and what both God and Cæsar claim ought to be given to God.

With these words He told them that if a man believes in the law of God, he can fulfil Cæsar's law only when it is not contrary to God's. For the Pharisees, who did not know the truth, there still existed a law of God which they would not have transgressed, even if Cæsar's law demanded it of them. They would not have departed from circumcision, from the observance of the Sabbath, from fasting and from many other things. If Cæsar had demanded of them work on a Sabbath, they would have said : " To Cæsar belong all days, but not the Sabbath." The same is true of circumcision and of other things.

Christ showed them with His answer that God's law stood higher than Cæsar's, and that a man can give to Cæsar only what is not contrary to God's law.

Now, what is for Christ and for His disciples Cæsar's, and what God's ?

One is horrified to think of the answer to this question, which one may hear from Christians of our time ! God's, in the opinion of our Christians, never interferes with Cæsar's, and Cæsar's is always in agreement with God's. The whole life is given up to the service of Cæsar, and only what does not interfere with Cæsar is turned over to God. Not so did Christ understand it.

For Christ the whole life is God's business, and what is not God's may be given to Cæsar.

" Unto Cæsar the things which are Cæsar's, and unto God the things which are God's."

What is Cæsar's ? The coin, – what is carnal, – not yours.

Give, then, everything carnal to him who will take it ; but your

life, which you have received from God, is all God's. This cannot be given to any one but God, because man's life, according to Christ's teaching, is the service of God (Matt. iv. 10), and one cannot serve two masters (Matt. vi. 24).

Everything carnal a man must give to somebody, and so may give also to Cæsar ; but he cannot serve anybody but God.

If men believed in Christ's teaching, in the teaching of love, they could not lose all the divine laws revealed by Christ, in order to fulfil the laws of Cæsar.

1887.