

What a Christian May and May Not Do

by Leo Tolstoy

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 he may not do.

According to Christ's teaching, the sons of the Father are free (Matthew 17:26), for they know the truth, and the truth shall make them free (John 8:32). 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, and 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 cannot even do violence to him or resist him with force. He cannot do evil to his neighbor, or even to his enemy.

The teachings 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. He predicted to them that He Himself would suffer, that they, too, would be afflicted and killed (Matthew 24:9), and that the world would hate them because they would not be the servants of the world, but of the Father (John 15:19-20).

Everything came to pass as Jesus had predicted. The world hated Him and tried to ruin Him. All – the Pharisees, the Sadducees, the scribes, and the Herodians – rebuked Him for being an enemy to Caesar, for prohibiting men from paying tribute to him, and for disturbing and corrupting the world. They said that He was an evildoer and that He made Himself a king, and thus was an enemy of Caesar (John 19:12).

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. They asked Him, "Teacher, we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?" But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, "You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax." They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, "Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?" "Caesar's," they replied. Then he said to them, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away. (Matthew 22:16-22)

They had expected Him to say either that it is lawful and necessary to pay tribute to Caesar – thus destroying 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 it is not lawful to pay tribute to Caesar – thus showing Himself to be an enemy to Caesar. But Christ said, "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." He said more than they had expected of Him. He defined everything, dividing everything a man has into two parts – the human and the divine – and said that what is man's may be given to man, what is God's cannot be given to man, but only to God, and what both God and Caesar 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 fulfill Caesar'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 that they would not have transgressed, even if Caesar'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 Caesar had demanded of them work on a Sabbath, they would have said, "To Caesar belong all of the other 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 Caesar's, and that a man can give to Caesar only what is not contrary to God's law.

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

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

Christ did not understand it in that way. For Christ, the whole life is God's business, and what is not God's may be given to Caesar. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's."

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

Give, then, everything carnal to him who will take it. But your life and the lives of all men, which have been received from God, are all God's.¹ They cannot be given to anyone but God, because man's life, according to Christ's teaching, is the service of God (Matthew 4:10), and one cannot serve two masters (Matthew 6:24). A man must give everything carnal to someone, and so may give it to Caesar, but he cannot serve anyone but God.

If men believed in Christ's teaching, and in His teaching of love, they could not ignore all the divine laws revealed by Christ, in order to fulfill the laws of Caesar.

1887

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¹ Transcriber's note – This is because people bear God's image (Genesis 1:27) and His inscription (Jeremiah 31:33).