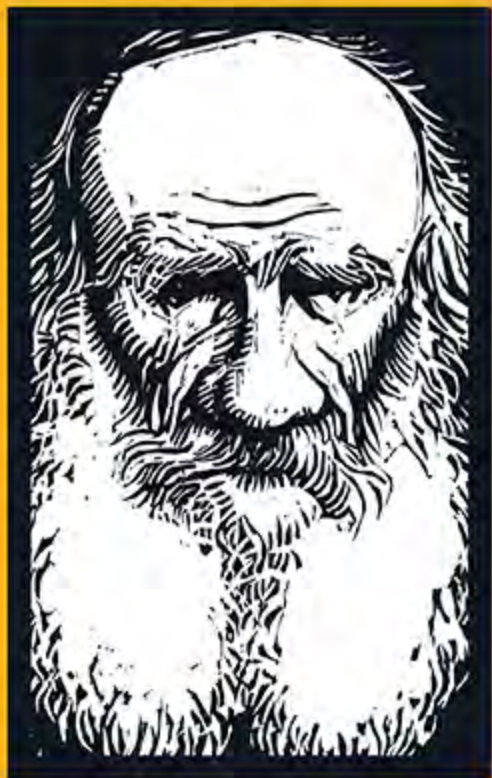


THE GOSPEL IN TOLSTOY



Selections from His Short Stories,
Spiritual Writings, and Novels

With Artwork by Fritz Eichenberg



Leo Tolstoy

This is a preview. Get entire book [here](#).

The Gospel in Tolstoy

*Selections from His Short Stories,
Spiritual Writings, and Novels*

Leo Tolstoy

Edited by Miriam LeBlanc

With Artwork by Fritz Eichenberg



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To the Reader

ALTHOUGH MORE THAN A CENTURY has passed since his death, for millions of readers the works of Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) have only grown in their power and appeal. Virginia Woolf’s verdict still rings as true as ever – Tolstoy is “the greatest of all novelists.” Certainly, he ranks with Dostoyevsky in his probing insight into the workings of human nature, and with Shakespeare in his generous empathy with a startlingly broad array of people. What’s more, his storytelling seems to have an effortless immediacy that, as Matthew Arnold said of *War and Peace*, leaves readers feeling they are experiencing not a piece of art, but simply life itself.

For such a writer, few justifications are needed for an anthology like this one, which includes much of what is widely regarded as Tolstoy’s best work. For readers who are eager to explore Tolstoy but just don’t have time for all eight hundred pages of *Anna Karenina*, this collection can serve as a tasting menu. Meanwhile, students and those who love classic literature will gain an appreciation of Tolstoy’s remarkable range before they plunge into one of his major books. At the same time, serious Tolstoy enthusiasts will find in this selection a new lens through which to appreciate afresh the rich landscape of the author’s work.

What, though, is “the gospel in Tolstoy” – is such a title even defensible? After all, this was a man who lost his traditional Christian faith as a teenager, and spent much of his career

attacking the Russian church of his upbringing. Despite a sincere conversion and his self-description as a Christian, his views fell well outside the usual norms of Christian orthodoxy – after all, he rejected most articles of the Nicene Creed, and even compiled a version of the Gospels from which anything miraculous, including the resurrection, is left out.

Yet with all his rationalism, Tolstoy remained a man haunted by Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus' example and teachings – especially the Sermon on the Mount – loomed over the writer's life in ways large and small, from his ardent pacifism to his repeated attempts to divest himself of his inherited wealth and privilege. Even before Tolstoy's conversion (recounted in the selection from his *Confession* in chapter 4), the search for God and the meaning of life already formed a powerful impulse in his writings. In a Christendom all too comfortable with oppressive worldly power, Tolstoy issued a sharp challenge to return to the radical call of Jesus.

Ultimately, this was a call to a way of unreserved love toward others – love not as a feeling or theological concept but as action in everyday life. As Eberhard Arnold suggests in the “Afterword,” this vision of love points to something beyond the rigid legalism to which Tolstoy was prone; it is a vision of a renewed world in which Jesus' promises have become reality.

At the beginning of the short story “What Men Live By” (Chapter 8), Tolstoy quotes the First Letter of John: “No man has ever seen God; if we love one another, God abides in us and his love is perfected in us.” This is where the gospel is to be found in Tolstoy – delivered in a way that speaks to people of any religion or none. Whether or not we agree with the great Russian on anything else, it's a lesson we can learn from him, and one that we can strive, as he did, to practice.

—*The Editor*

Biographical Sketch

Charles Moore

BORN AUGUST 28, 1828, Lev "Leo" Nikolayevich Tolstoy was the fourth of five children in a family of the old Russian nobility; he lost his mother by the age of two. His first eight years were spent at Yasnaya Polyana, the family's large country estate southwest of Moscow. When he was eight, the family moved to Moscow, and shortly after, his father suddenly died. The loss was devastating, and ever after Tolstoy would be deeply pained by the inevitability of death.

After being tutored at home, he set out for the University of Kazan in 1844. Repelled at first by the coarseness of student life, he gradually fell in with his peers. He lost so much money gambling that his brother Sergei eventually had to bail him out; he began visiting brothels. After his excesses he always fell into moods of despair and self-accusation.

In 1847, he left the university without completing a degree, and returned to Yasnaya Polyana. The estate became his on his eighteenth birthday, with its four thousand acres and three hundred serfs. He made plans to better the lives of his serfs: school for the children, housing, more nourishing food, better sanitary conditions for all. But whatever he offered them was met with suspicion, and their children were usually absent from school. The young Tolstoy was soon frustrated.

Tolstoy sensed that his life was heading nowhere fast. Whenever he visited Moscow, he fell back into his old student ways.

To get away, he joined his brother Nicholas, volunteering on a military expedition in the Caucasus. Although he continued to womanize and gamble, something new began to emerge. His thoughts—meticulously recorded in his diary—were now interspersed with reflections about the mysteries of life and religion.

He also began to write. During this period he published *Childhood and Boyhood*, largely autobiographical fictional works, which were well received by the reading public. In November 1854 he joined the defense of Sevastopol during its year-long siege by the French and their allies. What he saw on the front inspired the writing of *Sevastopol Sketches*, accounts that documented war's brutality.

In 1856, Tolstoy left the army and moved into the apartment of the famed author, Ivan Turgenev, who introduced him to key figures of Russia's literary world. By 1860, Tolstoy had become disgusted with high society and with himself, and began to turn his energies to teaching in a village school in Yasnaya Polyana.

Two years later he married Sophia Andreyevna Behrs, "Sonya," an energetic and intelligent eighteen-year-old. Despite her own capabilities, she was young and intimidated by her new fiancé. Though at first harmony and joy prevailed between them, quarrels came, in part because Sonya, after reading Leo's diary the day before their wedding, found out that his most recent mistress was still living on the estate. Besides, moving to rural Yasnaya Polyana was frightening for a Europeanized city girl. Still, Sonya was committed to seeing that the Tolstoy style of life was one to be envied. Their house was enlarged and remodeled, with plenty of room for an endless stream of guests and visitors.

In the first ten years of marriage, Sonya gave birth to six children. In all, they had thirteen. One result of getting married was that Tolstoy had to abandon his educational work. Sonya

demanding that he provide for her and for their expected family. Partly as a result, what had been brewing beneath the surface for years finally emerged in the form of what some consider the greatest novel ever written: *War and Peace*. For the next six years, the couple slaved together: he wrote, while Sonya plunged herself into the self-appointed task of protecting him from the outer world and copying and recopying the manuscript.

Upon completion of this masterpiece, Tolstoy was left inwardly exhausted. In *War and Peace*, he had grappled with the harsh and terrible fact of mortality. Generation after generation lives and dies – to what purpose? Leaving what behind? *War and Peace* ends in a series of unanswerable questions: what forces move the nations? Why do things happen? Why are we here?

Despite his inward alienation, or perhaps, because of it, Tolstoy, at his wife's persistence, managed in the 1870s to produce yet another great novel, *Anna Karenina*, which met with huge popular acclaim. The entire novel was written under the shadow of death. Of the 239 chapters, he gave a title to only one: the twentieth chapter of the Fifth Part, which he called, "Death." After *Anna Karenina* there would be no more great novels until *Resurrection*, published in 1899.

Though surrounded by success on all fronts, Tolstoy unraveled. He was plagued with suicidal thoughts, even to the point of hiding a rope, lest in a surge of sudden despair he take his own life. He consumed philosophy texts of every school of thought, hoping to find some explanation of the meaning of life. But neither the philosophers nor the sciences, not to mention his own contemporaries, helped him find what he was looking for.

Then it occurred to him to look beyond his own circle. He noticed that the peasants, despite their poverty, had an instinctive sense of life's purpose. Their faith in God and their simple

labor propelled them to live. And then it dawned on him: he too only lived at those times when he believed in God. It was a decisive conversion experience, after which the light never left him.

To nurture his newfound faith, Tolstoy strove to enter into the spirit of the peasants and to overlook the contradictions of the Orthodox Church. But when the Holy Synod ordered prayers to be said in the churches for the success of the Russian armies, and when Tolstoy heard the priest, who had so often read the Gospel injunction to love your enemies, utter supplications in the name of Jesus that God might destroy the Turks with sword and bombshell, his soul revolted and he walked away from the church for good. He became an outspoken pacifist whose ideas influenced, among others, Gandhi, George Bernard Shaw, and Martin Luther King.

Tolstoy's conversion led to numerous visible signs of sacrifice. Worldly goods and all the surface attractions began to appear to him as shackles, and eventually became a cross he found hard to bear. At times he sought to break with his entire past, to reject the family life he had dreamed of in his youth, and finally to give up all the wealth he had acquired, renouncing his property and giving up the profits from the sales of his books. Sonya watched as her husband embarked on a religious warpath that would throw the two of them into one debilitating battle after another.

Sonya was particularly anxious about their finances and the future of his literary works. She argued bitterly with Chertkov, Tolstoy's assistant, who wanted some of the publication rights. She fought desperately for the funds she deemed necessary to sustain the family's standard of living. In 1891, Tolstoy finally managed to officially renounce the rights to virtually all his works published after 1881, allowing his earlier works to financially benefit the family. He also signed over all his property to her and the children.

In 1882 Tolstoy volunteered as an official to help with the 1882 municipal census in Moscow. It was here that he observed the moral deterioration that overtook those who had slipped down into society's slums. Unable to cope with the contradiction between his life and what he saw, Tolstoy poured everything out in his book, *What Then Must We Do?* In answer to the question of the book's title, Tolstoy came to a simple conclusion: repent, engage in manual labor, and live and eat simply. The privileged classes must no longer expect to be fed, clothed, and waited upon by others—they must “get off the backs of the poor” and obey the basic law of life.

He sought to put his own teachings in practice. In 1891 a drought brought famine to the provinces of central Russia, and Tolstoy successfully organized relief for the peasants, sometimes feeding thousands of people in a day. When the Doukhobors, a religious sect, were harshly persecuted, Tolstoy collected an enormous sum to help them emigrate to Canada, using the profits of his novel, *Resurrection*. This novel, in part a shocking indictment of the Russian Orthodox Church and the state with which it was intertwined, met with stern disapproval from the authorities. In 1901, the Orthodox Church excommunicated him.

Tolstoy continued his efforts to live out his convictions, leading to quarrels with his wife that would become legendary. Finally, one night while lying in bed, the eighty-two-year-old Tolstoy reached a decision. In the pre-dawn hours of October 28, 1910 he secretly left home, accompanied by his daughter and his doctor. He soon fell ill, and just over a week later, he died at the Astopovo railway station.

On the day before his death, Tolstoy called out to his son: “Sergei! Sergei! I love Truth . . . very much . . . I love Truth.” And in many respects, this was Tolstoy's greatest legacy. Though

never a saint, or even completely consistent, he sought to be ruthlessly honest – both with himself and with those around him.

For Tolstoy, Truth was moral. It infuriated him that those who professed Jesus as being divine and infallible were also the very ones who neglected to do the things he actually taught. Although he replaces this inconsistency with one of his own – a Jesus who is not divine but whose words are – nevertheless, he rightly asked the question Jesus surely would have asked if he had been living during Tsarist Russia, and which perhaps could just as well be asked in our own day: how is it that self-professed Christians refuse to obey Christ?

In the end, Tolstoy's diatribes, whether against government, violence, property, or what have you, stem from his great understanding of love – a reality that encompasses a fraternal order rooted in heartfelt sacrifice. The extracts from his works that follow, taken from a cross-section of his novels, short stories, and spiritual writings, must therefore be read against this backdrop, or else one risks taking Tolstoy's words out of context. It is love that ultimately matters. In the end, as Tolstoy writes,

We can only unite with each other in God. We do not need to take steps toward each other; we need only to approach God. If there were a huge church in which the light from above fell only in the center, people would only have to go towards the light in the center to be gathered together. Be assured, if we all approach God, we will be drawn towards each other.

Finding God

For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened.

—Matthew 7:8



Illustration for Dorothy Day's The Long Loneliness

This is a preview. [Get entire book here.](#)

I.

The Three Hermits

An Old Legend Current in the Volga District

And in praying do not heap up empty phrases as the Gentiles do; for they think that they will be heard for their many words. Do not be like them, for your Father knows what you need before you ask him.
—Matthew 6:7–8

A BISHOP WAS SAILING from Arkhangelsk to the Solovetsky Monastery, and on the same vessel were a number of pilgrims on their way to visit the shrines at that place. The voyage was a smooth one. The wind favorable, and the weather fair. The pilgrims lay on deck, eating, or sat in groups talking to one another. The bishop, too, came on deck, and as he was pacing up and down, he noticed a group of men standing near the prow and listening to a fisherman who was pointing to the sea and telling them something. The bishop stopped, and looked in the direction in which the man was pointing. He could see nothing however, but the sea glistening in the sunshine. He drew nearer to listen, but when the man saw him, he took off his cap and was silent. The rest of the people also took off their caps, and bowed.

“Do not let me disturb you, friends,” said the bishop. “I came to hear what this good man was saying.”

“The fisherman was telling us about the hermits,” replied one, a tradesman, rather bolder than the rest.

“What hermits?” asked the bishop, going to the side of the vessel and seating himself on a box. “Tell me about them. I should like to hear. What were you pointing at?”

“Why, that little island you can just see over there,” answered the man, pointing to a spot ahead and a little to the right. “That is the island where the hermits live for the salvation of their souls.”

“Where is the island?” asked the bishop. “I see nothing.”

“There, in the distance, if you will please look along my hand. Do you see that little cloud? Below it and a bit to the left, there is just a faint streak. That is the island.”

The bishop looked carefully, but his unaccustomed eyes could make out nothing but the water shimmering in the sun.

“I cannot see it,” he said. “But who are the hermits that live there?”

“They are holy men,” answered the fisherman. “I had long heard tell of them, but never chanced to see them myself till the year before last.”

And the fisherman related how once, when he was out fishing, he had been stranded at night upon that island, not knowing where he was. In the morning, as he wandered about the island, he came across an earth hut, and met an old man standing near it. Presently two others came out, and after having fed him, and dried his things, they helped him mend his boat.

“And what are they like?” asked the bishop.

“One is a small man and his back is bent. He wears a priest’s cassock and is very old; he must be more than a hundred, I should say. He is so old that the white of his beard is taking a greenish tinge, but he is always smiling, and his face is as bright as an angel’s from heaven. The second is taller, but he also is very old. He wears a tattered peasant coat. His beard is broad, and of a yellowish grey color. He is a strong man. Before I had time to help him, he turned my boat over as if it were only a pail. He,

too, is kindly and cheerful. The third is tall, and has a beard as white as snow and reaching to his knees. He is stern, with overhanging eyebrows; and he wears nothing but a mat tied round his waist."

"And did they speak to you?" asked the bishop.

"For the most part they did everything in silence and spoke but little even to one another. One of them would just give a glance, and the others would understand him. I asked the tallest whether they had lived there long. He frowned, and muttered something as if he were angry; but the oldest one took his hand and smiled, and then the tall one was quiet. The oldest one only said: 'Have mercy upon us,' and smiled."

While the fisherman was talking, the ship had drawn nearer to the island.

"There, now you can see it plainly, if your Grace will please to look," said the tradesman, pointing with his hand.

The bishop looked, and now he really saw a dark streak – the island. Having looked at it a while, he left the prow of the vessel, and going to the stern, asked the helmsman:

"What island is that?"

"That one," replied the man, "has no name. There are many such in this sea."

"Is it true that there are hermits who live there for the salvation of their souls?"

"So it is said, your Grace, but I don't know if it's true. Fishermen say they have seen them; but of course they may only be spinning yarns."

"I should like to land on the island and see these men," said the bishop. "How could I manage it?"

"The ship cannot get close to the island," replied the helmsman, "but you might be rowed there in a boat. You had better speak to the captain."

The captain was sent for and came.

“I should like to see these hermits,” said the bishop. “Could I not be rowed ashore?”

The captain tried to dissuade him.

“Of course it could be done,” said he, “but we should lose much time. And if I might venture to say so to your Grace, the old men are not worth your pains. I have heard say that they are foolish old fellows, who understand nothing, and never speak a word, any more than the fish in the sea.”

“I wish to see them,” said the bishop, “and I will pay you for your trouble and loss of time. Please let me have a boat.”

There was no help for it; so the order was given. The sailors trimmed the sails, the steersman put up the helm, and the ship’s course was set for the island. A chair was placed at the prow for the bishop, and he sat there, looking ahead. The passengers all collected at the prow, and gazed at the island. Those who had the sharpest eyes could presently make out the rocks on it, and then a mud hut was seen. At last one man saw the hermits themselves. The captain brought a telescope and, after looking through it, handed it to the bishop.

“It’s right enough. There are three men standing on the shore. There, a little to the right of that big rock.”

The bishop took the telescope, got it into position, and he saw the three men: a tall one, a shorter one, and one very small and bent, standing on the shore and holding each other by the hand.

The captain turned to the bishop.

“The vessel can get no nearer in than this, your Grace. If you wish to go ashore, we must ask you to go in the boat, while we anchor here.”

The cable was quickly let out, the anchor cast, and the sails furled. There was a jerk, and the vessel shook. Then, a boat

having been lowered, the oarsmen jumped in, and the bishop descended the ladder and took his seat. The men pulled at their oars, and the boat moved rapidly towards the island. When they came within a stone's throw they saw three old men: a tall one with only a mat tied round his waist: a shorter one in a tattered peasant coat, and a very old one bent with age and wearing an old cassock – all three standing hand in hand.

The oarsmen pulled in to the shore, and held on with the boathook while the bishop got out.

The old men bowed to him, and he gave them his benediction, at which they bowed still lower. Then the bishop began to speak to them.

"I have heard," he said, "that you, godly men, live here saving your own souls, and praying to our Lord Christ for your fellow men. I, an unworthy servant of Christ, am called by God's mercy to keep and teach his flock. I wished to see you, servants of God, and to do what I can to teach you, also."

The old men looked at each other smiling, but remained silent.

"Tell me," said the bishop, "what you are doing to save your souls, and how you serve God on this island."

The second hermit sighed, and looked at the oldest, the very ancient one. The latter smiled, and said:

"We do not know how to serve God. We only serve and support ourselves, servant of God."

"But how do you pray to God?" asked the bishop.

"We pray in this way," replied the hermit. "Three are ye, three are we, have mercy upon us."

And when the old man said this, all three raised their eyes to heaven, and repeated:

"Three are ye, three are we, have mercy upon us!"

