

13.2 Letter to Tsar Alexander III, 8-15 March 1881

Your Imperial Majesty,

I, an insignificant, unqualified, poor, weak man, am writing a letter to the Russian Emperor and advising him what he should do in the most complex, difficult circumstances which have ever existed. I feel how strange, improper and impudent this is, and yet I am writing. I think to myself: if you write this letter, it will be of no use, and it will either not be read or it will be read and found to be harmful, and you will be punished for it. This is all that can happen. And there will be nothing for you to regret about it. But if you don't write this letter and learn afterwards that no one had told the Tsar what you meant to say, and that the Tsar thought and said to himself afterwards when it was too late to change anything: if only someone had told me then! If this happens, you will for ever regret not having written what you thought. And therefore I am writing to Your Majesty to say what I think.

I am writing from the depths of the country and I know nothing for certain. What I know, I know from newspapers and from rumours, and I may therefore be writing unnecessary nonsense about something which may not be so at all; if so, pray forgive my presumption, and believe me when I say that I am not writing because I think highly of myself, but only because I am already so much to blame towards everybody that I am afraid of being even more to blame through not doing what I can and ought to do.

(I am not going to write in the tone in which people usually write letters to emperors – with flourishes of false and servile eloquence which only obscure both feeling and thought. I shall write simply as man to man. My genuine feeling of respect for you, as a man and as a Tsar, will be more evident without these adornments.)

Your father, the Russian Tsar, a kind old man who had accomplished much good and had always wished people well, was inhumanly mutilated and killed – not by personal enemies, but by enemies of the existing order of things. He was killed in the name of the supposed greater good of mankind. You have taken his place, and have before you those enemies who poisoned your father's life and caused his death. They are your enemies because you occupy your father's place, and for the sake of the illusory general good which they seek, they are bound to wish to kill you too.

In your soul there must be a feeling of vengeance towards these people as the murderers of your father, and a feeling of terror at the obligation which you have had to take upon yourself. It is impossible to imagine a more terrifying situation – more terrifying because it is impossible to imagine a stronger temptation to do evil. Enemies of the fatherland and of the people, despicable rascals, godless creatures who have ruined the tranquillity and the lives of millions of people who are your subjects – they are also your father's murderers. What else is there to do but to cleanse the Russian soil of this infection, and to crush them like vile serpents? This is not required of me by my personal feelings, nor even by a desire to avenge my father's death; it is required of me by my duty, it is expected of me by the whole of Russia.

The whole terrifying nature of your situation lies in this temptation. Whoever we may be – Tsars or shepherds – we are all men, enlightened by Christ's teaching.

I am not speaking of your obligations as a Tsar. Before the obligations of a Tsar there are the obligations of a man, and they must form the basis of the obligations of a Tsar and coincide with them.

God will not ask you to fulfil the obligations of a Tsar; he will not ask you to fulfil a Tsar's obligations, but he will ask you to fulfil human obligations. Your situation is terrifying and for that reason alone Christ's teaching is necessary in order to guide us in those fearful moments of temptation which fall to the lot of men. To your lot has fallen the most terrifying of temptations. But however terrible it is, Christ's teaching overcomes it, and all the snares of temptation which encompass you will vanish like dust for a man who fulfils the will of God. Matt. 5, 43: Ye have heard that it hath been said, Thou shalt love thy neighbour, and hate thine enemy. But I say unto you, Love your enemies...do good to them that hate you – That ye may be the children of your Father which is in heaven. Matt 5, 38: Ye have heard that it hath been said, An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth: But I say unto you, That ye shall resist not evil. Matt. 18, 20: I say not unto thee, Until 7 times: but, Until 70 times 7. Do not hate your enemy, but do good to him, do not resist evil, do not cease to forgive. This is said to man and any man can fulfil it. And no considerations, whether the Tsar's or the state's, may break these commandments. Matt. 5, 19: Whosoever therefore shall break one of these least commandments, and shall teach men so, he shall be called the least in the kingdom of heaven; but whosoever shall do and teach *them*, the same shall be called great in the kingdom of heaven. Matt. 7, 24: Therefore, whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock. And everyone hearing... [there is a gap in the text here].

I know how far the world in which we live is from those divine truths which are expressed in the teachings of Christ, and which live in our hearts – but the truth is the truth, and it lives in our hearts and calls forth our

admiration and the desire to draw near to it. I know that I, an insignificant, worthless man whose temptations are 1,000 times weaker and those which have fallen on you, have given in not to truth and goodness, but to temptation, and that it is impertinent and mad of me, having done evil to man, to require of you a spiritual strength which has no precedent; to require that you, the Russian Tsar, under pressure from all who surround you, and being a loving son, should after a murder forgive the murderers and return them good for evil; but I cannot help wishing this, nor can I help seeing that your every step in the direction of forgiveness is a step towards good; or that every step in the direction of punishment is a step towards evil. And so, just as in quiet moments when I experience no temptation, I hope and wish with all my heart and soul to choose the path of love and goodness for myself, so I now wish it for you, and cannot help hoping that you will strive to be as perfect as your father is in heaven and to do the greatest thing in the world and overcome temptation; that you, the Tsar, will set the world the greatest example of the fulfilment of Christ's teaching – that you will return good for evil.

Return good for evil, resist not evil, forgive everyone.

This and this alone needs to be done; this is the will of God. Whether one has or does not have the strength to do this is another question. But we must wish for this alone, we must strive towards this alone, we must consider this alone to be good and must know that all considerations to the contrary are temptations and seductions – *all considerations to the contrary, all* are groundless, unsound and unenlightened.

But, apart from the fact that every man can and must be guided in his life by nothing other than these expressions of God's will the fulfilment of these divine commandments is at the same time the most sensible course of action for your own life and for the lives of your people. Truth and goodness are always truth and goodness on earth as well as in heaven. To forgive these terribly transgressors of human and divine laws and to return them to good for evil will seem to many people, at best, idealism or madness, and to many others an ill-intentioned act. These latter will say: 'What is needed is not to forgive, but to purge the corruption, to put out the fire.' But if one challenges those who say this to prove their opinions, both madness and ill-intent will be found to be on their side.

About 20 years ago a nest of people was formed – mostly young people – who hated the existing order of things and the government. These people imaged a different order of things, or even no order at all, and by every godless, inhuman means – by fires, robberies, murders – tried to destroy the existing system of society. For 20 years people have been fighting against this nest. Like a beehive, it constantly brings forth new workers and to this day this nest has not only not been destroyed, but has been growing bigger, and these people have gone so far as to commit the most terrible acts of cruelty and audacity which upset the course of the life of the state. People who tried to fight this plague with superficial, external remedies, employed two types of remedy: the one, that of directly cutting away what was diseased and rotten by harsh punishments; the other, that of allowing the disease to run its course without regulating it. The latter were the liberal measures intend to satisfy the discontented forces and to diminish pressure from the harmful ones. For people who look at the matter from a material point of view, there are no other ways – either firm measures of excision or liberal weakness. Wherever any people gathered to discuss what needed to be done in the present circumstances, and whoever they were – friends in a drawing room, members of a committee, meetings of representatives – if they talked about what should be done in order to excise the evil, they would never go beyond these two views on the subject: either excision – harshness, executions, exiles, the police, tightening of the censorship etc., or liberal indulgence – freedom, a moderate relaxation of penal measures, even representative government, a constitution, an assembly. People can say a great deal more that is new with regard to the details of the one or the other manner of action: many people from one and the same camp will be in disagreement over many things and will argue, but neither the one nor the other will abandon their positions – some will look to the remedy of the forcible excision of evil, others will look to the remedy of giving an outlet to, and not curbing the growing unrest. Some people will treat the illness by firm remedies against the illness itself; other people will not treat the illness, but will attempt to place the organism in the most advantageous and most hygienic conditions, in the hope that the illness will go of its own accord. It is very possible that both will say much that is new in detail, but they will not say anything new, because both systems have been tried and both have not only failed to cure the sick man, but have had no effect at all. The illness continues to the present day, gradually growing worse. And therefore I think that one should not without more ado call the application of God's will to political affairs a day-dream or madness. If we regard the fulfilment of God's will, that holiest of holies, as a remedy against everyday, worldly evil, then we must not look on it disdainfully once it has become evident that all worldly wisdom has not helped and cannot help. They treated the sick man with strong remedies and then they stopped giving him strong remedies and allowed his organism to function freely, but neither system has helped: the sick man is getting sicker. There remains yet another remedy – a remedy about which the doctors are completely ignorant, a strange remedy. Why not try it? This remedy has one primary and inalienable advantage over the others and that is that the others have been used with no success while this one has never been used.

People have tried in the name of the state's need to secure the good of the masses, to restrict freedom, to exile and execute; they have tried in the name of the same need to secure the good of the masses, to give freedom, and the result was just the same. Why not try in the name of God only to fulfil His law, without thinking about either the state or the good of the masses. There can be no evil in the name of God and the fulfilling of His law.

The second advantage of a new remedy – also an indubitable one – is that the other two remedies were bad in themselves: the first consisted in force and executions (no matter how justified they may have appeared, everyone knew that they were evil) and the second consisted in a not entirely honest connivance at freedom. The government gave this freedom with one hand and held it back with the other. The application of both these remedies, however useful they may have seemed to the state, was not a good thing for those who applied them. But the new remedy is such that it is not only natural to man's soul, but it also brings supreme joy and happiness to man's soul. Forgiveness and the returning of good for evil are good in themselves. Therefore the application of the two old remedies must be repugnant to the Christian soul and must leave behind a feeling of regret, while forgiveness brings supreme joy to the one who practices it.

The third advantage which Christian forgiveness has over repression or the artificial direction of harmful elements relates to the present moment and has special importance. Your own condition and that of Russia now is like the condition of a sick man going through a crisis. One false step, or the application of an unnecessary or harmful remedy can destroy the sick man for ever. In the same way, a single action now in one sense or the other: whether avenging evil by cruel executions or convening representatives – may seal our future. Now in these 2 weeks when the criminals are being tried and sentenced, a step will be taken which will select one of 3 paths at the crossroads before us: the path of suppressing evil by evil, the path of liberal indulgence (both paths already tried and leading nowhere), or a new path – the path of Christian fulfilment of God's will by the Tsar, as a man.

Sire! As a result of some fatal, terrible misunderstandings a terrible hatred against your father flared up in the souls of the revolutionaries – a hatred which led them to commit a terrible murder. This hatred can be buried with him. The revolutionaries could – although unjustly – have blamed him for the death of dozens of their comrades. But you are pure in the eyes of all Russia and in their eyes. There is no blood on your hands. You are the innocent victim of your position. You are pure and innocent in your own eyes and in the eyes of God. But you stand at the crossroads. A few days more, and if those people triumph who say and think that Christian truths are only for conversation, and that in the life of the state blood must flow and death must reign, then you will pass for ever from that blessed state of purity and life in God, and will enter on the dark path of the needs of the state which justify everything, even the transgression of God's law for man.

If you do not forgive, but execute the criminals, you will only have uprooted 3 or 4 individuals from among hundreds and, evil begetting evil, 30 or 40 will grow up in place of these 3 or 4, and you will have lost for ever the moment which alone is worth more than a whole lifetime – the moment when you could have fulfilled God's will but did not do so; you will leave for ever the crossroads where you could have chosen good instead of evil, and will be forever entangled in evil deeds called the interests of the state. Matt. 5, 25.

Forgive; return good for evil, and from among hundreds of evil-doers, dozens will come over – not to you and not to them (that is not important) but will come over from the devil to God, and thousands, even millions of hearts will tremble with joy and emotion at the sight of this example of goodness from the throne at such a terrible moment for the son of a murdered father.

Sire! If you were to do this, to summon the people, to give them money and to send them away somewhere to America, and were to write a manifesto headed by the words: 'but I say unto you, love your enemies', – I don't know about others but I, a poor loyal subject, would be your dog and your slave. I would weep with emotion as I am weeping now, every time I heard your name. But what am I saying – 'I don't know about others?' I know that at these words goodness and love would flow across Russia in a torrent. The truths of Christ are alive in the hearts of man, and they only are alive, and we love others only in the name of these truths.

And you, the Tsar, would proclaim this truth, not in word but in deed. But perhaps this is only a dream and nothing can be done about it. Perhaps, even though it is true that (1) there is more probability of success with actions not yet tried than with actions which have been tried and proved useless, and (2) that such an action is undoubtedly good for the one who performs it, and (3) that you now stand at the crossroads and that this is the only moment when you can act according to God's law, and that if you allow this moment to escape you can never bring it back – perhaps all this is true, but it will be said that it is impossible. If you did this you would ruin the state.

But let us suppose that people are used to thinking that divine truths are truths only for the spiritual world and are not applicable to the earthly one; let us suppose that doctors say: we do not accept your remedy because, although it has not been tried and it is not harmful in itself and it is true that there is a crisis now, we know that it is no use and can do nothing except harm. They will say: Christian forgiveness and returning good for evil are all right for each man, but not for the state. The application of these truths to the government of the state will ruin the state.

Sire! This is a lie, a most evil, most perfidious lie, to say that the fulfilment of God's law will ruin people. If this is the law of God for man, then it is always and everywhere the law of God, and there can be no other law to express His will. And there are no more blasphemous words than to say: God's law is no good. In that case it is not God's law. But let us suppose that we forget that God's law is above all other laws and we forget that it is always applicable. Very well: God's law is not applicable and if we fulfil it, the evil will become even worse. If the criminals are forgiven, if they are all released from prison and from exile, the result will be an even worse evil. But

why should this be? Who said so? How do you prove it? By your own cowardice. You have no other proof. Moreover, you have no right to reject anybody else's remedy because everyone knows that yours are no good.

People will say: if you release all the criminals, there will be a massacre, because when a few are released, there are minor disorders, so when a great many are released, there will be major disorders. They reason in this way and speak of revolutionaries as if they were bandits or a gang which had joined together and would be finished once they were caught. But it is not like that at all: it is not their number which is important, nor is it important to destroy or exile a few more of them, but it is important to destroy this ferment, and replace it by a different ferment. What are revolutionaries? They are people who hate the existing order of things, find it evil, and envisage the foundations of a future, better order of things. One cannot fight them by killing and destroying them. It is not their number which is important but their ideas. To fight against them one must fight spiritually. Their ideal is a general sufficiency, equality, and freedom. To fight against them, one must oppose their ideal with another ideal which will be superior to, and will include their ideal. The French, the English, and the Germans are fighting them now, and also without success.

There is only one ideal which can be opposed to them. It is the one from which they have themselves proceeded, without understanding it and blaspheming it, one which includes their ideal – the ideal of love, forgiveness and the returning of good for evil. Only one word of forgiveness and Christian love, spoken and fulfilled from the height of the throne, and the path of Christian rule which is there for you to tread, can destroy the evil gnawing away at Russia.

As wax before fire, every revolutionary struggle will melt away before the Tsar-man who fulfils the law of Christ.