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Talk among
leisured people

Lev Tolstoy

A talk among leisured people

(A prologue to the story "Walk in the light.")

Guests once gathered at a wealthy house. And so it happened that a serious conversation started about life.

They spoke about people absent and present, but could not find a single person satisfied with his life.

Not only no one could share his happiness, but there was no one who would recognize that he was living as a Christian should live. All confessed that they were living worldly lives, in cares only for themselves and their families, and none of them thought of the others, and even less of God.

So guests talked among each other, and all agreed in blaming themselves for living godless, unchristian lives.

"Then why do we live like this?" exclaimed a young man. "Why do we do

what we disapprove ourselves? Don't we have the power to change our lives?

We ourselves are aware that our luxury ruins us, so as our effeminacy, our riches, and chiefly – our pride, our separation from the fellow men. To be noble and rich, we have to deprive ourselves of all that gives joy to the life of a human. We crowd ourselves into cities, become effeminate, ruin our health, and in spite of all our amusements, we die of boredom and of regrets that our life is not what it should be.

“Why do we live like this? Why do we spoil our lives and all the well-being that is given to us by God? I don't want to live like that anymore! I will drop the education I started – it would only bring me to the same tormenting life on which we are all complaining now. I will renounce my property and go to live in the country among the poor. I will work with them, will learn to work with my hands, and if my education is of any use to the poor I will share it with them, but not through institutions and books but directly by living with them in a brotherly way.”

“Yes, I have made up my mind,” he added, looking inquiringly at his father, who was also present.

“Your wish is a worthy one,” said his father, “but thoughtless and ill-considered. It may seem so easy to you only because you do not know life. It does not matter what seems good to us! But the fact of the matter is the execution of what is good is hard and complicated. It is hard enough to walk well on a beaten track, but it is even harder to lay out new paths. New paths

are made only by people who are thoroughly mature and have mastered all that is attainable by people. It seems to you easy to make new paths of life only because you do not yet understand life. All this is a frivolity and youthful pride. That's what we, old folk, are for – to moderate your impulsiveness and guide you by our experience, and you young folks should obey us, to benefit from our experience. Your productive life is yet to come, but now you are growing and developing. Finish your education, make yourself thoroughly conversant with things, get on to your own feet, have firm convictions of your own, and then start a new life if you feel you have strengths to do so. But for now you should obey those who are guiding you for your own good, and not try to open up new paths of life."

The young man got silent and those older than he agreed with what the father had said.

"You are right," said a middle-aged married man, turning to the father of the young man. "It is true that the lad, having no life experience, can make a mistake in looking for new paths of life, and his decision cannot be a firm one. But we all agreed that our life is contrary to our conscience and does not give us happiness. So we cannot but recognize the legitimacy of the desire to leave this life."

"The young man can take his dream for a conclusion of the reason, but I am no longer young and will tell you about myself: as I listened the talk this evening, the same thought occurred to me. It is plain to me that the life I now live cannot give me the serenity of conscience or happiness. My reason and experience show me that. Then what am I waiting for? I struggle from

morning till evening for my family, but it turns out that both I and my

families live ungodly, and get further and further sunk in sins. You do that for your family, but it is not better for your family, because what you do for them is not a well-being. And so I often think would it be better if I changed my whole life and did just what that young man said: would stop caring about my wife and children and began to think about my soul. As Paul said this for a reason: 'The married one cares about pleasing his wife, but unmarried cares how he may please God.'"

But before the married one had finished speaking, his wife and all the women present here attacked him.

"You ought to have thought about that before," said an elderly woman.

"You have put on the yoke, so you must draw your load. Like that, everyone will say he wishes to go off and save his soul when it seems hard to him to support and feed his family. That is dishonest and cowardly. No! A man should be able to live godly within the family. Otherwise it is too easy to just save yourself. But, most importantly – to do so is to act contrary to Christ's teaching. God bade us love others; but in that way you would in God's name offend others. No. A married man has certain obligations and he must not neglect them. It's different story when your family are already on their own feet. Then do for yourself what you want. But no one has a right to force the family."

But the married man did not agree with that. He said, "I didn't want to leave

my family. All I am saying is that my family should not be brought up in a worldly fashion, not so that they accustomed to live for their lust, but must live in the way, as we have just been saying, so that young children from their early days become accustomed to hardship, to work, to the service to others, and above all to the brotherly life with all. And for that we must abandon our nobility and wealth."

"There is no need to upset others while you yourself do not live a godly life," exclaimed his wife irritably. "You yourself lived for your own pleasure when you were young, then why do you want to torment your children and your family? Let them grow up quietly, and later they will do what they want, and

you do not force them!"

Her husband went silent, but here an elderly man spoke up for him.

"Let us admit," he said, "that a married man, having his family accustomed to a certain comfort, cannot suddenly deprive them of all this. It is true that when you have begun to educate your children it is better to finish it than to break up everything – especially as the children when they grow up will choose the path they consider best for themselves. I agree that for a family man it is difficult and even impossible to change his way of life without sinning. But for us old men it is what God commands. Let me say for myself:

I am now living without any obligations, and to tell the truth, simply for my belly. I eat, drink, rest, and am disgusted and sickened by myself. So it is

time for me to give up such a life, to give away my property, and at least before my death to live as God commanded to live a Christian."

But the others did not agree with the old man, either. There was also his niece and goddaughter, whose all children he had baptized and gave presents on holidays, and his son. They all protested.

"No," said his son, "You worked in your time, and it is time for you to rest and not trouble yourself. You have lived for sixty years with certain habits and must not change them now. You would only torment yourself in vain."

"Yes, yes," confirmed his niece. "You would be in need and not in the spirit, and would grumble and sin more than ever. God is merciful and will forgive all sinners, not only you, such a kind one, dear uncle!"

"Yes, and why should you?" added another old man of the same age as uncle. "You and I have perhaps only a couple of days to live, so why should we start new ways?"

"What a strange thing!" exclaimed one of the guests who was silent until then. "What a strange thing! We all say that it would be good to live godly and that we are living badly and suffer in body and soul, but as soon as it comes to practice it turns out that the children must not be upset and must be brought up not in godly fashion but in the old way. Young people must not

disobey their parents, and must live not in the godly way, but as before. A married man must not upset his wife and children and must live not in a

godly way but as of old. And there is no need for old men to begin anything: and they are not used to it and have only a couple of days left to live. So it seems that none of us may live rightly: we may only talk about it."

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