If Christian prayer must be prayed with love for God and our neighbours, then Christian behaviour is life lived in the same mode.

There are those who claim that we are only responsible for and to ourselves; that we must be free to ‘do our own thing’. But that is not what the Bible says. The Bible says that we belong to God because we belong to a Covenant community and that true freedom lies in keeping the Covenant and obeying God’s Commandments.

Think back to our story of faith in the Old Testament. The Lord God chose a community of people and entered into a Covenant of Love with them. He promised to lead them out of slavery into freedom while they, in turn, promised to keep God’s Commandments.

The Commandments

It is too easy to dismiss the Ten Commandments as an ancient and outdated set of rules which have little relevance today. When Jesus was asked, ‘Which commandment is the first of all?’ he answered, ‘The first is, ‘Hear O Israel; the Lord our God the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength’. The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’. (Mark 12:29-31) There was nothing original about his answer. He was pointing to the essential spirit of the commandments, love for God and love for our neighbours. And it is noteworthy that his Jewish questioner commended him on his reply.

Jesus did not do away with the Ten Commandments. Rather, he did what the Prophets had done before him; he tried to recall the people of Israel back to their Covenant vocation to love God and love one another.

The command to love is the foundation of all Christian behaviour. Saint Paul says, ‘Owe no one anything except to love one another; for he who loves his neighbour has fulfilled the law. The commandments, ‘You shall not commit adultery, You shall not kill, You shall not steal, You shall not covet’, and any other commandments, are summed up in this sentence, ‘You shall love your neighbour as yourself’. Love does no wrong to a neighbour; therefore love is the fulfilling of the law.’ (Romans 13:8-10)

Jesus calls us to be his brothers and sisters living together in a community of love; a community called to live a new life and to behave in a totally new way; a community of people who, far from ‘doing their own thing’, live with their Lord and for one another.

But how are we to do that? Most of us are not moral theologians, nor do we have the time to apply the command to love in every daily situation. That’s where rules and laws come in handy.

Love and Law

Rules and Laws are the commonly agreed disciplines we use to order our day-to-day behaviour.

The discipline of honesty is one such rule. Life in society would be impossible if the discipline of honesty was not generally accepted. ‘Do not steal’, ‘Do not covet’, ‘Do not bear false witness’, are all rules which reflect the discipline of honesty. They are all important rules and they should not be easily set aside for they are blessed by the accumulated wisdom of the past and it would be foolish to do away with them without good cause.

Most of the time the command to love would not conflict with the rules and laws of our society. But it is important to remember
that love cannot be contained by rules and there will be occasions when particular rules need to be set aside in order to obey the command to love.

It is easy to agree with a rule that says, 'Thou shalt not steal'. But what if I am a refugee who is faced with a choice between watching my child starve or stealing food to keep her alive? And it is easy to agree that we should respect those in authority. But what if the person in authority is Adolf Hitler? And what would I do if I was presented with the opportunity to help organise his assassination? There were German Christians who were presented with precisely that dilemma. So how do we decide when and how to apply the command to love?

Principles and Guidelines

Archbishop William Temple suggested a number of principles and guidelines which we might keep in mind when making Christian moral decisions.

1. Love affirms the value and dignity of human life.

Jesus said, 'Even the hairs of your head are numbered' (Matthew 10:30)

We were created to be loved; things were created to be used; but so often we get it round the other way.

2. Love respects human communities.

Paul said, 'If one member suffers, all suffer together; if one member is honoured, all rejoice together'. (1 Corinthians 12:26)

We were created to live in society and none of us is entitled to act solely for our own advantage.

3. Love seeks justice.

Jesus said, 'Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me.' (Matthew 25:40)

Justice is that which produces the greatest good for those who are farthest from the centres of power. We are to be biased in favour of the poor and the powerless.

4. Love recognises the duty of service.

Jesus said, 'If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet.' (John 13:14)

Albert Schweitzer expressed the essence of this principle when he said, 'The only ones among you who will be truly happy are those who have sought and found how to serve'.

5. Love recognises the power of sacrifice.

Jesus said, 'He who does not take up his cross and follow me is not worthy of me'. (Matthew 10:38)

Real progress is never achieved by force, only by sacrifice. William Temple said, 'I should be ready to affirm that so far as real progress has been won by means of strikes, it has never been really due to the inconvenience caused to employers or to the public, but to the sympathy called out by the endurance of the strikers, and (still more) to a realisation of the justice of the cause to which their endurance may call attention'.

We may be able to formulate other principles but the basic principle of Christian behaviour is always the same; we must behave as those who are commanded to love. Christian behaviour is love in action; love with its sleeves rolled up.

Think about it

To bomb cities as cities, deliberately to attack civilians, quite irrespective of whether or not they are actively contributing to the war effort, is a wrong deed, whether done by the Nazis or by ourselves.

- Bishop George Bell