

The Maker's instructions

Being a Christian is not simply a matter of what you believe. It is not simply a matter, either, of being committed to things that will help you to grow.

Being a Christian needs to affect the whole of the way we live.

God's guidelines for human behaviour are laid down in the Scriptures.

They are not to be seen as narrow rules but the Maker's instructions on how life is to be lived.

As we grow in the Christian life we need to know what these standards are and we need to be willing to keep them.

We will never fully reach the standard of behaviour and attitudes which God has set for us. But for every Christian there is a call to increasingly become more like Christ as He dwells in our hearts through faith.

God is willing to forgive our sins and to give us his grace. Knowing this keeps a Christian going when he is confronted with his weaknesses.

Loving God and loving others

This is the way Jesus summarized all of the Jewish law:

'Love the Lord your God with all your heart,
with all your soul, with all your mind.
This is the first and greatest commandment.'

The second is like it: "Love your neighbour as yourself."
All the law and the prophets hang on these two commandments.

Christians are called to live in this rhythm of worship and mission: loving God and loving our neighbour.

The Good Samaritan

What does it mean to love our neighbour? See the story Jesus told in Luke 10.25-37.

In the light of this story – who is my neighbour?

- in the place where I live?
- in the place where I work?

- in the context of the whole world?

Fighting the battle

The Bible describes the Christian life as a battle.

We fight the battle on three fronts, according to the Heidelberg Catechism (a document from the 16th century). When it explains the sixth petition of the Lord's Prayer—"And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one"—it says: "That is, In ourselves we are so weak that we cannot stand even for a moment. Moreover, our sworn enemies—the devil, the world, and our own flesh—do not cease to attack us. Will You, therefore, uphold and strengthen us by the power of your Holy Spirit, so that in this spiritual war we may not go down to defeat, but always firmly resist our enemies, until we finally obtain the complete victory."

1. AGAINST THE DEVIL

The devil is real. Jesus encountered him and so will we. His chief business is to frustrate the purposes of God by every means. He is a determined adversary and never gives up.

Look up 1 Peter 5:8-9 and James 4:7

What do you learn from these verses about the enemy's power and strategy? How do you counter him?

2. AGAINST THE WORLD

According to Jesus, the 'things of the world' have real power to draw a Christian away from Christ.

Look up the account of the seed which fell among thorns and in rocky places (Luke 8:6-7).

What do you think 'the things of this world' are and why do they have this power?

3. AGAINST 'OUR OWN FLESH'

When you became a Christian all of your sins were forgiven. The reign of sin in your life came to an end. But you didn't stop sinning.

Look up these two passages where Paul describes the battle between the old self (same as 'our own flesh') and the new self:

- Romans 7:15-25
- Galatians 5:16-24

Share in small groups whether this experience of a battle against sin is real to you. What battles have you fought (or are fighting now)?

'I repent of my sins . . . I renounce evil'

Christians are called to oppose injustice and turn their backs on evil. That is the promise we make when we are baptized and it should affect every part of our lives.

Many people become Christians having been involved with all sorts of unjust and wrong practices and organisations, including involvement with the occult. Sometimes it will be easy to let go of these things. Sometimes they will have taken a dangerous grip of our lives.

Putting it into Practice

Even for Christians who are mature, it may not always be that simple to think through what is right or wrong in a situation and to put it into practice – especially when God is concerned not just for individuals but for communities and the whole world.

In small groups, take one or two of the following situations each and discuss what you would do, or what you think the Church's response should be:

- Diane has become a Christian recently. She has been living with her boyfriend for three years and the couple have a young daughter. Now she has become a Christian, Diane wonders what she should do about this situation. How do you advise her?
- Eric works for a haulage company. He discovers that his colleagues and the works foreman are cheating the company. In the past this hasn't bothered him. Now he is a Christian, it does. How should he act?
- Susan is a school governor at the local Church school. She discovers strong racist attitudes there among the governors and some of the staff in the school, which apply in the admissions policy and in the appointment of staff. What should she do?
- The Church Council is reviewing the church finances for this year. A deficit is forecast of about 10 per cent of the total budget. Some members of the Council propose that the amount allocated to be given to mission and relief work be cut (about ten per cent) for that year. What should the Council do?

Strength for the Christian life

Perseverance is a vital Christian discipline. You need strength for the Christian life. You can receive this strength from

- the cross of Jesus Christ through which Jesus won the victory over sin and death and triumphed over all the powers of the enemy.
- The Holy Spirit living in each Christian and empowering us for the fight.
- The whole armour of God (Ephesians 6)—God's equipment for the battle.

For reflection

Where is God calling you to change your lifestyle at the present time?
Where do you need forgiveness and help? What strength do you need?

In the week to come, read Ephesians 6:10-20. Practise putting on the armour of God each day and standing firm in the Christian life.