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Pitfalls of Christianity

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Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven.

Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?'

Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!'

Matthew 7:21–23



THE CHRISTIAN LIFE CAN BE likened to a roadway, which leads to eternity; not a smooth, wide roadway, but one that is circuitous, on which we encounter sheer slopes and inclines and an occasional dead end. Here and there are potholes—pitfalls—that are easy to fall into, blind alleys into which we can run.

Even with the best of intentions we may, without being fully aware of it, find ourselves falling ever deeper into a hole, or trapped in a blind alley where both the road and the destination vanish. This has been my personal experience.

Non-believers are often more aware of these pitfalls than Christians, and as a result tend to question Christianity's credibility. But Christianity cannot be blamed because we have lost sight of what is important. The list of pitfalls is just about endless and certainly each one of us, all too easily, falls into them.

This booklet contains warning signs for the Christian (the boxed texts are descriptions of wrong understanding that leads us into pitfalls). There is also knowledge for non-believers on what Christianity is.

So what can we do in our efforts to avoid pitfalls? We avoid

them by looking to Christ in our daily lives (Hebrews 12:1–3), and knowing that the motives for our thoughts and deeds are to his glory, not to ours or other people or organisations (Colossians 3:17, 1 Corinthians 6:19–20). We avoid pitfalls by doing the Father's will.

LK Booklets seek to clarify the gospel message by making it relevant for our time. It is our desire to help individuals to understand both themselves and their relationship with God, irrespective of their religious affiliation.

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What is a pitfall or blind alley?

- *Whatever becomes more important in life than God.*
- *Whatever becomes a goal rather than a means in worshipping God.*
- *Whatever separates us from God.*
- *Whatever causes us to stagnate as Christians.*
- *Whatever causes us to lose the joy of our relationship with God.*
- *Whatever causes us to burn out as Christians.*
- *Whatever element in the Christian message which, at the cost of other important aspects, receives excessive attention.*

IN OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD, ANY SINGLE PERSON OR THING can become a blind alley or pitfall if we give those things so much attention that our life in Jesus and his message lose their central importance. In spite of good intentions, life is then no longer in balance. God wants us to enjoy life to the full, but that can only come about if he makes new people of us and remains our Lord and Saviour, our best friend and the central figure in our lives.

The pitfall of legalism

God loves me because I keep his law. Therefore I am clean in God's eyes and will be saved.

Legalism occurs when obedience to God becomes more than the fruit or evidence of faith (New Dictionary of Theology). Obedience to God's law is seen as an element of how we become just and clean in God's sight and thereby earn salvation. The keeping of the law has become the main goal of this person's life.

God gave the law to OT Israel as a blessing and as guidelines on how to live. The blessings of keeping the OT law and covenant were physical with no promise of salvation.

God requires more of Christians today than he did of OT Israel. Jesus elevated the law

to a higher plane, to its innermost meaning: love. God expects us to hold the intent of the law—its essence—, which is *agape* (love). The NT law is God's eternal law, which he has always abided by: love including God's own goodness (Gal. 5:22) and moral excellence.

The law expresses God's holy will for the life and behaviour of mankind. Paul says the law is good and holy (Rom.7: 12) and that love is the fulfilment of the law (Rom. 13:10). But the law shows us our sins, it judges us; it cannot give eternal life. The new covenant has better promises than the old (Hebrews.8:6), offering salvation from eternal death through grace: the forgiveness of sin. The most important aspect of our relationship with God is his love for us, not what we can do for him. Christianity is not based on rules, but on God's love for us.

Solution

Christianity is a religion based on grace. In contrast to other world religions, our relationship with God is not based on our deeds. We are and always will be his children because we are his creation. God loves us not because we are good or successful. We can never deserve his love by keeping the law. He loves us because we are his children. Salvation cannot be earned—it is a gift. □

GOD SAYS THAT IN THE NEW Testament (NT) he will write the law on our hearts (Jeremiah 31:33) rather than on tablets of stone.

Indeed, Paul says he would not have known what sin was if it wasn't for the law (Romans 7:7). He also says that the law is good and holy (Romans 7:12). Therefore there is no fault in the law, rather the fault lies with us—in our inability to keep the law. And we can see this also in Old Testament (OT) Israel's unsuccessful attempts to keep God's standards.

Jesus has removed the penalty of the law by taking it upon himself. In the NT he has elevated the moral laws of the OT to a higher plane. It is no longer about keeping the law to the letter, but rather its inner meaning—the intent. It is no longer sufficient to avoid committing adultery—we are not to so much as entertain the thought. We are no longer to hate our enemies, we are to love them!

Under the new covenant God expects us to forgive those who have done us wrong—just as he forgives our wrongdoings! It is God's love we are to exhibit to one another, not our own.

OT law was governed by regulations. It is in the Sermon on the Mount that Jesus explains how NT law functions today.

The pitfall of freedom from law

Jesus has nailed the law to the cross. The law was our enemy, and the love of Jesus has removed it. We have total freedom in Christ to live as we please.

Solution

In the NT the law is elevated to a higher plane where it is the essence of the law that is in force—God's love—not the letter of the law.

Our righteousness must surpass that of the Pharisees (Matthew 5:20). The law written on our hearts is God's own moral goodness by the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). □

The 'go it alone' pitfall

I will follow Jesus in my own way, as I think best and without assistance. I have no need of fellowship; I will serve God my way.

IT IS IMPORTANT FOR CHRISTIANS to realise that Christianity is not a solo career. Our own ability and strength of character are not sufficient in our striving to reach the standard that God has set for us. This is the main conclusion of the Old Testament. We have all done wrong and that is why Jesus offers grace through the Holy Spirit, and ability to reach the standard God has set. The first step a Christian must take is to accept God's forgiveness and his will for the

Christian life. We must accept that God's ways and thoughts are superior to our own. When we accept forgiveness at baptism we return our lives to God, so that he can renew us.

Paul writes in Galatians 2:20, "I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me." Paul is saying that the old self, with all its lusts, ambitions and values must be discarded. We must also acknowledge that even the best things about us are not worthy of the new life.

That we can improve ourselves by our own strength is a thought that has its origins in humanism's view of mankind's ability. But we cannot reach God's ethical plane without his help. We also need to help one another (Galatians 6:2) by carrying one another's burdens. The Church is a group of people who need one another's help in order to serve God.

Solution

One must realise that a Christian is not a repaired person, but a completely new person! It is only with the help of Jesus that you can become what God would have you be. You cannot of yourself overcome sin. Sin is removed from your life by the power of God working through you, not by your own power. □

THIS BLIND ALLEY CAN ALSO BE called the pitfall of "amiability" and has come about because of a misunderstanding of the real meaning of love. Today the term 'love' has become synonymous either with sex or a meek and weak, sentimental attitude towards others. But love is something far different to that.

The English word 'love' is a translation of three Greek words: *eros*, *filia* and *agape*. *Eros* defines the sexual—hence words such as erotic and eroticism. *Filia* defines friendship and brotherly love.

Agape, which defines God's love, is neither sentimental thought nor deference. Professor Peter Kreeft defines *agape* as "the genuine concern shown for another person, governed by what is deemed best for them in the long-term". Love is powerful. It may be that reproof or punishment is what is best in the long-term; and it is not necessarily so that the person concerned will be appreciative of that!

Agape-love is not emotional. No one can be forced into emotion, but even so God instructs us to love our enemy. We can deal with an enemy from the point of view of what is best for them. This is completely different to having sentimental emotions for them. When we come to understand

The pitfall of "love"

Christians are to exercise deference, and never be annoyed or demanding.

agape in this way, we begin to see how it is possible for God to love us and yet, at the same time, allow us to experience difficulties. He knows what is best for us in the long-term—because he views everything from the standpoint of eternity.

Solution

Remember that God's love (*agape*) is a powerful force, not a weakness! □

The pitfall of duty

The motive for our actions is a sense of duty. We help others not because we want to, but because the Bible makes it an obligation.

HERE WE SEE A SENSE OF DUTY taking the upper hand. Duty, rather than God's love, has become the motive and driving force for our actions. Helping others because we feel obligated to do so can lead to burn out. It is not a sense of duty that is to drive us, but a feeling of wanting to conduct ourselves towards others in the way God is towards us. We need to make the effort to allow God's love to flow

through us and manifest itself again to other people. The love we exhibit is actually not our love!

In Matthew 25:40 Jesus says: "I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me." And in Matthew 18:3-5: "I tell you the truth, unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore, whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. And whoever welcomes a little child like this in my name welcomes me." When we reach out to the least, the weakest and the poorest, then we are serving God.

When we help our neighbour it is as though we have done it for Jesus himself. Serving others is our service to God! All who find themselves in Christian welfare should understand that. We serve God happily and lovingly—not because we feel obligated. We help others gladly, not because the Bible says we are to, but to allow God's love in us do it!

Solution

This is a pitfall women often fall into. Clarify for yourself why you serve others. Is it out of a sense of duty, or genuine care; is it because you feel compelled, or because you want to exhibit God's love? □

THE PACT GOD HAS WITH MAN has always been a pact of liberty. However, that does not mean we choose our own lifestyle! God drew up a pact with Israel that saved them out of Egypt and slavery and gave them freedom. Israel was no longer to be Egypt's slave but a free people, ruled over by God.

Jesus came to give us freedom. In Isaiah 61:1 we read: "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners...."

The Christian freedom is freedom from the penalty of sin, from the shame of sin and from the fear sin evokes. Paul calls himself God's *servant*—the definition of the Greek word used here being *slave*. A Christian is no longer a slave to sin, work, status symbols, or to what people might think about them. A Christian is free from all those things, has security and can be genuinely satisfied with their existence as God's representative—or 'slave'—as Paul expresses it. A slave of God has true freedom from permanent death, from fear of the unknown and the future and from feelings of anxiety, inferiority, etc.

The pitfall of freedom

Christian freedom means you can choose your own lifestyle. The law is nailed to the cross and there are no rules or regulations. You are free!

The Western world has freedom of the press, freedom of speech and freedom of religion. However, we are answerable for violation and misuse of these freedoms; and that is also the case for Christian freedom. Freedom and law are two sides of the same coin.

Solution

Christians must understand that freedom obligates. We have given God our lives—we are his property and thus his slaves—and are therefore freed from human concerns. □



A farmer went out to sow his seed. As he was scattering the seed, some fell along the path; it was trampled on, and the birds of the air ate it up.

Some fell on rock, and when it came up, the plants withered because they had no moisture.

Other seed fell among thorns, which grew up with it and choked the plants.

Still other seed fell on good soil. It came up and yielded a crop, a hundred times more than was sown.

This is the meaning of the parable: The seed is the word of God.

Those along the path are the ones who hear, then the devil comes and takes away the word from their hearts, so that they may not believe and be saved.



Those on the rock are the ones who receive the word with joy when they hear it, but they have no root. They believe for a while, but in the time of testing they fall away.

The seed that fell among thorns stands for those who hear, but as they go on their way they are choked by life's worries, riches and pleasures, and they do not mature.

But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.

Luke 8:5–8, 11–15

But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.

Matthew 7:14



The pitfall of academics

Christianity has become a religious hobby, where one collects knowledge of God but fails to put it to use in daily life.

THIS PITFALL IS A DIVORCE FROM reality, reducing Christianity to an academic exercise with no genuine influence on one's daily life. What it amounts to is collecting as much knowledge as possible, rather than living the Christian life. This doesn't mean we should not strive for knowledge—indeed knowledge gives us an improved understanding of and brings us closer to our Creator. There is an Indian proverb that says:

“Knowledge without action is a disease.”

Christianity has become a religious hobby that teaches little about how one should live one's life. One may become fond of religious discussion at the cost of offering assistance to people in need.

Often excessive attention is given to a speculative biblical subject that takes up a lot of time and interest—such as a study of prophecy, or the time for Jesus return. In this way the study becomes a goal in itself without consequences for the manner in which we live our lives. In this case it becomes more important to clarify for others the time at which Jesus will return. No one knows how long they will live and Jesus can return at any time. He may return in your lifetime, and if you should die before that event, then in your next moment of consciousness you will stand before Jesus at the resurrection. It is not for us to search out the day of Jesus' return, but to prepare ourselves for that day.

Solution

“Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says” (James 1:22). Faith without deeds is useless (James 2:20). Christianity is not only knowledge, but belief in God. □

COMPANY EXECUTIVES CAN make disastrous decisions if they have insufficient knowledge of their company's products, culture and history. This can also happen to Christians who interpret Bible passages without proper reflection and consideration of context, and of other scriptures which address the issue in hand. Paul exhorts us in 2 Timothy 2:15: “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.”

It is important to be knowledgeable of the story preserved in the Old Testament (OT) so that we do not make the same mistake as the Israelites. “These things happened to them as examples and were written down as warnings for us, on whom the fulfilment of the ages has come. So, if you think you are standing firm, be careful that you don't fall!” (1 Corinthians 10:11–12).

John 14:13 is a good example of this pitfall: “And I will do whatever you ask in my name”. Some may see this to be saying that we can demand anything of God. In that case we have totally missed the reality that it is we who serve God, not the reverse. What is more, one has not seen

The contextless pitfall

This pitfall is dug by taking scriptures—or the Bible message as a whole—out of context.

the significance in praying in Jesus' name. For us, our name is just a label; for the Jews, a name summed up a person's character. To pray in Jesus' name does not mean to simply mention his name, but to pray in accordance with his will—not our own!

Solution

Look at the author's words from his viewpoint. Avoid misunderstandings by gaining a general insight into the Bible and thus the ability to carefully weigh one statement against another. □

The pitfall of double standards

Now you listen to me, because I know about this! You must do as I tell you, but on the other hand, don't do as I do!

MANY CHRISTIANS ARE unaware of the fact that non-believers are extremely sceptical of Christianity. In their failure to conduct themselves in the manner they prescribe for others, Christians expose themselves to non-believers as hypocrites. Non-believers cannot be expected to take the Christian message seriously when Christians themselves don't hold to what they loudly proclaim.

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says we are to be the salt of the earth (Matthew 5:13). Salt has important properties: it preserves, cleanses and flavours. But once it loses its salinity, so it loses its worth. Christians are to be the salt of the earth.

Jesus goes on to say that Christians are to be the light of the world: good examples of a correct lifestyle. That Christian words are reflected in one's conduct, is the best possible testimony!

It is in good Christian conduct that the non-believer comes to see the extraordinary, which makes a stronger point than good arguments!

To the hypocrite, Jesus says: "You hypocrites! Isaiah was right when he prophesied about you: *These people honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me*" (Matthew 15:7-8).

James writes that a Christian is to be a doer of the word, not just a hearer. There is no gain in our knowing how a Christian should live if we fail to live up to it; even less if as Christians we proclaim the right lifestyle, but fail to set the standard ourselves.

Solution

Live your life in the Christian manner you proclaim! You know what you ought to do—so do something about it—today! ☐

WE COULD ALSO CALL THIS the pitfall of pietism. Piety came as a reaction to a lack of personal conviction in Christian life in the late 18th century. In Norway, Hans Nilsen Hauge was a leading figure in that area. Many at that time experienced Christianity as detached from and irrelevant to daily life, a pitfall that pietism correctly addressed. But in time pietism created its own pitfall as it stagnated years later.

The Christian life can become grey and miserable if our joy in God is choked, in which case it is the seriousness of Christianity that has come to the forefront, rather than our joy!

Joy has to do with focus. Is our focus on ourselves or on God? In Nehemiah 8:10 we read "...the joy of the Lord is your strength." Joy in our relationship with God is the strength we need for daily life!

In 1 Thessalonians 5:16 Paul writes: "Be joyful always." God desires that joy be our basic approach to life. Irrespective of how difficult life gets we can focus on the positive and maintain inner joy.

Delight yourself in the Lord, says the Psalmist (Psalm 37:4) and in your relationship with him. Get your mind off of your own worries, troubles and

The pitfall of seriousness

Christianity is serious business! It's about our Creator's death. It's about eternal life—or eternal death! There is no place for joy—this is a matter of seriousness.

weaknesses—they may well otherwise break you! Focus on God, not on yourself.

Solution

That you exhibit joy in your life is God's desire! Joy is his gift to you through the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22). God is always with you—delight yourself in him! ☐

The pitfall of self-condemnation

How can God love a sinner like me? He cannot possibly forgive me for all that I have done—and to which I am continually drawn back. I do not deserve God's love.

MANY FIND IT EASIER TO forgive others than to accept forgiveness for themselves. They are of the opinion that they are so worthless that God cannot possibly forgive them.

Prior to his conversion, the apostle Paul made every effort to destroy Christianity, a false Jewish doctrine as he saw it. He imprisoned Christians and was

responsible for the deaths of many of them. We would probably all agree that God has forgiven Paul—in which case why would he not also forgive you?

And that wasn't the end of Paul's failings! He was prone to fall back into his old ways. In Romans 7:19 he writes: "For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing." Yet God has forgiven Paul and used him as a powerful instrument. So why would God not forgive you and use you as his ambassador?

Some feel they should have a greater concern for others than they have for themselves; they find it difficult to accept being good towards themselves and so cannot accept forgiveness. But they are wrong, because in summing up the law, Jesus says: "... love God", and "your neighbour as yourself".

God loves us all—not because we deserve it or are good, rich, clever or successful, but because we are his creation—his children.

Solution

Show God how serious you are in your relationship with him and accept his forgiveness. Don't allow your Christianity to be harmed by an inability to accept forgiveness. Don't allow pride to stand in the way of God's forgiveness. □

WE HAVE ALL MET THEM AT one time or another—people who always know best and are critical of others. In their own eyes they are often prophets crying in the wilderness—but also continually amazed that no one listens to them. The reason behind why they lack an audience lies in their negative attitude. Worse than that is their assertion that they are Christians.

Matthew 7:1–3, 5 admonishes us: "Do not judge, or you too will be judged. For in the same way as you judge others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you. You hypocrite, first take the plank out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to remove the speck from your brother's eye." Strong words! We will be judged with the same severity we use in judging others!

God alone is our judge. Only he can judge justly because he knows every detail of our lives—every thought and motive. He is the only righteous judge.

Solution

A Christian is to be a positive, helpful person, and at the same time a good example of how one should live with and conduct one's self in relationships with other people.

The pitfall of criticism

They have little positive to say about others, are critical and judgemental and always know best. They do not listen to what is being said, being more concerned with preparing their own reply.

It is easier to be critical of others than it is to conduct one's own life correctly. That includes life as a Christian. □

The pitfall of dramatics

To become a Christian one must experience a miracle, such as speak in tongues, faint in the Spirit, or some other physical manifestation of God's Spirit.

SOME CHRISTIANS HAVE A taste for the spectacular and feel they cannot be Christian unless they in some way first experience a dramatic manifestation of the Spirit. Mass meetings with faith-healing and speaking in tongues are arranged: Test the Spirit, as the Bible says, if this really is God's Spirit or not. But if the focus is more on the fruits of the Spirit than on its source—God—then in spite of all of that, one is on the wrong track. Manifestations of the Spirit can be

spectacular, but that is not what is most important! We need God's love, forgiveness, belief and hope. Spiritual healing, which is that our relationship with God be restored, is the most important thing.

In Acts 8, Simon Magus attempts to buy the gift of miracles. Regarding manifestation of the Spirit, he was more interested in the spectacular than in his relationship with God. Manifestations and the fruits of God's Holy Spirit have concrete objectives: to show the love and care that God has for his creation. The manifestation of God's Spirit is not an entertainment.

In Matthew 7:21–23 we see Jesus' opinion of those who have done wonders in his name, but failed to do God's will. Jesus says he doesn't know them. Strong words to those who have miracles as their goal!

Solution

Ask first if this manifestation is of God; ask secondly if the focus is centred on a spectacular manifestation of the Spirit or on God; thirdly take note of Paul's good advice in 1 Corinthians 14:33 and 40, where he says that everything should be done in a fitting and orderly way, because God is not a God of disorder. □

THE WESTERN WORLD TODAY enjoys a higher standard of living than ever before! God has blessed us materially in ways that people living a century ago could never have imagined. But blessings can become a pitfall. When interest in material things begins to take up an increasing amount of time and energy, it becomes the uppermost interest in our lives. At that point blessings have become a pitfall.

Jesus says we cannot serve God and Mammon. God says he will not allow us to be in need if we trust in him. He knows what it is that we are in need of. In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus says: "So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ... your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well" (Matthew 6:31–33).

This doesn't mean that we can just lean back and wait for God to supply everything for us. We do that to our own folly. The Christian is to set a good example also in regard to the work ethic—but our focus must be balanced so that the material does not oust God from our lives. The young man in Matthew 19 was a slave to his own wealth. He trusted in his

The pitfall of materi- alism

We become so attached to the material blessings we are given, that they begin to overshadow he who gives them—God.

own fortune to help him through life, rather than trust God. That was his pitfall. Riches can be a blessing from God, but we must be wary of making those blessings life's centrepiece.

Solution

Be thankful for your blessings without allowing them to become your main interest in life. Simplify life by not becoming a slave to possessions. All you have comes from God. Be generous towards him and he'll be generous to you. □

The pitfall of dead faith

Salvation is by grace and nothing more is required of you than that you believe. Obedience to God and good works are not necessary. You are saved by grace. Jesus has overcome for you and you may live as you please.

IN THIS PITFALL, ONE CLAIMS TO believe, but neither exhibits nor reflects that belief in the consequences of daily life. Luther maintained that salvation is by grace alone; and it is true that salvation cannot be earned but

comes only as a gift of God. However, let's see what James says (James 2:20, 26): "You foolish man, do you want evidence that faith without deeds is useless? As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead." James says that belief that has no consequences in your life—how you treat your family, your partner, your neighbours and colleagues—is dead belief.

Jesus sharply condemns dead belief in Matthew 7:22, where he makes clear that it is only those who live in accordance with God's will who will receive salvation. And God's will is that you live your life in thanks to him, and thereby to his honour in all you think, say and do (Colossians 3:17), and that you love God with all your heart and your neighbour as yourself. In other words, that you treat others as God treats you. It is that to which God has called you, so that his loving deeds will be seen in you.

Solution

We are saved by grace through faith; but the concept of faith includes obedience to God. It is God's desire that we exercise the living faith that will save us! □

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Thank you!

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