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PRIDE OR PURPOSE?

By Karla Downing

“God did it. God gets all the glory,” said Jenny, a group leader in the church ministry I am involved in. Ben responded, “One thing I always have to remember is that none of this is about me.” I inwardly vowed to not feel proud about my ministry. However, when I thought about it I began to question how I should feel about the gifts God has given me. Is it wrong to feel good about the things I do for God? How should I feel when I receive compliments? Am I allowed to feel personal satisfaction over the fruits of my ministry? Can I take any credit for the things I do well?

I experience a quiet confidence from recognizing and using my gifts for God. I feel a sense of accomplishment and purpose that gives me joy and fulfillment. Knowing that I am using my experience and knowledge to help others enables me to look confidently at the future as I see God’s hand in using my past and even my failures for his glory.

Pride is viewed as a negative characteristic, a feeling of conceit or being puffed up with an arrogant superiority. Conceit implies an excessive view of one’s abilities. Yet, we often experience a feeling of satisfaction and delight with our accomplishments such as when we look at a finished painting or teach a good lesson. We should have these feelings of pleasure and satisfaction when using the gifts that God has given us. There is a difference between feeling satisfaction and joy over fulfilling your purpose versus feeling arrogant pride about all “you” are doing. The following points illustrate that difference:

God Has Given Us Everything We Have

The Israelites were about to enter the Promised Land where they would have an abundance of goods (Deuteronomy 8). God forewarned them that this abundance could cause them to forget him. “You may say to yourself, ‘My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.’ But remember the Lord your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth and so confirms his covenant” (vv. 17-18). God wanted them to remember that their resources came from him. We, too, have received everything we have from God: life, salvation, intelligence, personality, gifts, opportunity and material possessions. If we remember where our resources come from, we will not feel arrogant in our success. We will experience humble gratitude, knowing that it is by God’s grace and goodness that we have what we have and are what we are.

We are Responsible for Using Our Talents for God's Glory

Jesus told a story about a man who gave different amounts of money to three servants (Matthew 25:14-30). Their master held them accountable to do something with the money. He did not expect equality of results, only some return on his investment. God expects us to use the resources we have been given. When we give an account of our lives, the focus will be on whether we used our talents, rather than on how much we accomplished.

God rewards us for our effort rather than the outcome because the results are God's domain. Paul said, "I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God made it grow. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God, who makes things grow. The man who plants and the man who waters have one purpose, and each will be rewarded according to his own labor" (1 Corinthians 3:6-8). We can honestly take credit for what we do, as Paul did, graciously accepting compliments or credit without feeling proud about the outcome.

Our Motives Determine Our Reward

It is not just what we do but why we do it that matters to God. The Pharisees performed their righteous acts to be seen by others (Matthew 6:1-18). Jesus let them know that their motives were more important to him than their acts. Because their motive was to receive praise from men, they had received their reward. Other self-centered motives that lead to pride and self-exaltation include self-promotion, lust, and greed. Good motives include obeying God, helping others, taking care of responsibilities, pursuing righteousness, and doing our best in all things as if we were doing them for the Lord.

We Need to Compare Ourselves to Ourselves, Not to Others

When we compare ourselves to others, it's easy to feel superior or inferior, as there are always others who seem better or worse than we are. Instead, we should compare ourselves to what we are capable of doing and to Christ. We can compare the present to the past to see if we are maturing. Jesus told another story of a Pharisee that stood before God and compared himself to another, thanking God that he was better than the other person. A tax collector stood in the same sanctuary and said, "God have mercy on me, a sinner" (Luke 18:9-14). Looking at himself, he knew he fell short. No matter how much we do, when we keep the focus on ourselves we will know we fall short, which keeps us humble.

Galatians 6:3-4 says, "If anyone thinks he is something when he is nothing, he deceives himself. Each one should test his own actions. Then he can take pride in himself, without comparing himself to somebody else." This use of the word pride would not imply arrogance or conceit because without comparing ourselves to other people we cannot feel superior.

We Ought Not to Keep a List of What We Do

One day I caught myself making a mental list of all the people I had helped in my ministry. "*I have done a lot for God lately,*" I thought. Then I realized that the surge of arrogance I was

feeling was pride. Keeping a list put my eyes on what I was doing. That was more than a feeling of satisfaction; it was crossing over into arrogant conceit. Jesus said, “Do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret” (Matt. 6:3). When we pay a great deal of attention to our righteous deeds and keep lists, we are in danger of thinking too much of ourselves.

Getting Satisfaction from What We Do Is Not the Same as Pride

It is gratifying and fulfilling to feel satisfaction over an accomplishment or talent. Solomon questioned the meaning of life in Ecclesiastes. He concluded that riches and wealth on their own are meaningless, but that finding satisfaction in our labor and enjoying its fruit is how God intends for us to derive joy and fulfillment from life. God created us with creativity and drive. After creating the world, “God saw all that he had made, and it was very good” (Genesis 1:31). God felt pleasure and satisfaction. We also can feel good about what we do without slipping into pride.

We generally have an easier time accepting compliments and credit for the things we do that are “non-spiritual.” Yet God does not divide our lives into spiritual and non-spiritual. Using our abilities to create art, cook a meal, give a business presentation, preach a sermon, raise our children, or encourage a weak church member are all equal in service. All can yield satisfaction for our lives.

Quiet Confidence Comes From Knowing We Are Doing What God Created Us to Do

Each of us is created as a unique individual. We are invited to know ourselves well enough to assess our abilities realistically, so we can serve faithfully. Our life experiences further enhance our uniqueness, as we become a molded vessel by our Heavenly Father specifically created to do the good works that he foreordained for each of us. Each of us has a function in the body of Christ. Finding that place is part of entering into God’s plan for us. David said, “I cry out to God Most High, to God who fulfills his purpose for me” (Psalm 57:2).

How does it feel to be a part of that divine plan? It feels good. The quiet confidence that comes from knowing you are who God created you to be and that you are fulfilling your unique purpose produces peace, fulfillment, and satisfaction. God invites us to look at the fruits of our lives and say, “It is good.”

(All Scriptures from NIV)