

***Question: What would Jesus say about those who keep track of their own good deeds in order to promote themselves in the eyes of others?***

The philosophy of self-promotion and entitlement because “you deserve it” has been popularized by some television advertising and so-called “reality” shows. “You have to look out for yourself,” some people declare, “if you don’t, no one else will.” Among other things, this seems to imply that you will need to keep up with everything good you do and be sure everyone around you knows about it. This way you will get credit for what has been done and not someone else. Such an approach to life may appear to have some advantages, but it is diametrically opposed to what Jesus taught his followers.

Instead, Jesus taught that our good deeds are to be seen as a means to “praise your Father in heaven” (Matthew 5:16). In the Sermon on the Mount he said that acts of righteousness like giving to the poor, praying and fasting are not to be done in order to be seen by men (Matthew 6:1ff). Instead, he said: “When you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing” (Matthew 6:3). This principle suggests that you should do these good deeds without thought of keeping track of what you are doing. In the parable of the sheep and the goats, Jesus quoted the righteous as saying: “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?” (Matthew 25:37). They certainly had no record of their good deeds.

Because of the human tendency toward boastful pride, we should not keep track of our good deeds. One of the Lord’s apostles wrote: “For everything in the world-- the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does-- comes not from the Father but from the world” (1 John 2:16). Therefore, we are told: “It is by grace you have been saved, through faith-- and this not from yourselves, it is the gift of God-- not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9). As the apostle Paul wrote: “May I never boast except in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ, through which the world has been crucified to me, and I to the world” (Galatians 6:14).

While he was on earth, Jesus went around “doing good and healing all who were under the power of the devil” (Acts 10:38). To follow this example, his followers have been called upon “to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share” (1 Timothy 6:18). Believers are also told that Jesus Christ “gave himself for us to redeem us from all wickedness and to purify for himself a people that are his very own, eager to do what is good” (Titus 2:14).

Jesus wants us to do our good deeds for the benefit of others and the praise of God, not for any personal advantage. They should be a natural expression of our generous spirit and love for others. The Lord knows about our good deeds, but we can never do enough to make up for what he has done for us. That is the reason our salvation is a gift of his grace and not based on our goodness. We have no reason to keep track of our good deeds. Therefore, as the wise man said: “Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; someone else, and not your own lips” (Proverbs 27:2). May we learn to find joy in doing good for others whether they ever find out or not who may have done these good deeds.

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