

"BOATSING"
(Romans 3:27-31)
Douglas Moo

One of the most common and perhaps basic of all sins is illegitimate pride—what Paul calls "boasting." The tendency for finite, weak, and sinful human beings to think too much of ourselves is endemic and hard to rid ourselves of. John calls it "boasting of what [a person] has and does" (1 John 2:16). We easily bring such boasting into our relationship with God. In addition to being sinful, it carries two great dangers. (1) *It stifles our worship.* As long as we think, however subconsciously, that we have contributed something to our salvation, we will not put God on as high a plane as we should. We will loom too large and he will seem too small—and we will not worship with the absolute sense of humility, dependence, and thanksgiving that always marks the best worship.

(2) The other danger arises from the fact that the accomplishments in which we are tempted to boast are so inconsistent and imperfect. When things are going well and we are feeling pretty good about ourselves, it is easy to put confidence in ourselves. But the inevitable difficult times will come—and if our confidence rests in ourselves, we will find ourselves with no good foundation on which to stand.

A more subtle kind of illegitimate boasting is often only a hair's breadth from a legitimate sense of contentment from doing the will of the Lord. When we obey the Lord by avoiding a sin we were tempted to commit or by doing an act of kindness, it is entirely appropriate for us to have a sense of contentment and even of self-satisfaction. Paul, for instance, can express legitimate pride in his ministry, calling himself an "expert builder" (1 Cor. 3:10) and boasting about how he "worked harder" than all the other apostles (15:10). But, significantly, in each of these texts, Paul attributes the value of his ministry to the working of God's grace. Pride in our good deeds or works of ministry must always recognize that God, not ourselves, is the cause of whatever good we accomplish.

But this perspective is hard to maintain. I know I can hardly perform a "righteous act" without instantly marring it with pride. I recently joined some other people from my church to help paint the house of a brother who was seriously ill. In the midst of my painting comes a persistent voice that begins by saying, "You are doing a good deed. God is going to be happy with you." Perhaps there is nothing wrong with this feeling—so far. But quickly the voice moves on to say, "You should take pride in what you are doing. God is surely bound to reward you because you are being so good." The minute we think that our good works exert a claim on God, we have moved from legitimate contentment to illegitimate boasting. All our works, however good they may be—and all our works in this life are inevitably stained by sin—are the product of God's grace, as his Spirit moves in us.

