

# The Unlikely Path from Shame to Boasting



by EDWARD T. WELCH

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All enduring world cultures are founded on distinctions between honor and dishonor, or honor and shame—the Old and New Testament cultures among them. Who deserves honor and praise? Who is to be shunned or spurned?<sup>1</sup> The least complex version of these distinctions is a caste system in which lineage alone determines status. Other cultures usually rely on a combination of family status and some version of personal achievement. In the United States—a relatively newer culture that includes many subcultures—our standards for honor and shame tend to be less predictable, which leads to obsessions about personal identity that never quite deliver enough honor. Yet we still bank on measures of achievement such as income, education, beauty, athletics, and fame itself.

Up or down. We scramble to get higher; we judge those who seem higher in order to push them lower, or we are resigned to our low

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1. The early material on shame and honor comes out of the mission literature. Theologians began to pick it up later. For example, E. Randolph Richards and Brandon J. O'Brien, *Misreading Scripture with Western Eyes* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2012). Christian counselors have only gradually developed the applications for everyday life.

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position. Since the fall, all this has taken its place as an important and daily part of human life. Interestingly, Scripture does not reject these age-old cultural traditions of honor and shame. Instead, it turns them upside down and restores them to their original intent. God lifts up the poor, oppressed, and humble. He brings down those who exalt themselves (Luke 14:11).

This article continues the discussion about this reversal in Scripture. It considers how the apostle Paul was smitten with the gospel's implications for honor and shame and how he takes these implications to wonderful extremes. Watch for words such as confidence, boasting, certainty, and their neighbors. These words can take their place among more familiar ones that describe God's blessings on his people such as belonging, clean, holy, rich, lifted up, and strong.

### **Shame, Confidence, and Boasting in Daily Life**

Notice how shame, confidence, and boasting are a regular part of our days. When children fail at anything—a test in school or are cut from the soccer team—they do *not* walk with their head held high. They feel shame and want to disappear with their head bowed, not looking anyone in the eye. Almost immediately, that failure spreads and they are persuaded that they are bad at everything. Their confidence suffers. They will feign sick to avoid the eyes of their peers. Their shame is Job-like: “I stood in great fear of the multitude, and the contempt of families terrified me, so that I kept silence, and did not go out of doors” (Job 31:34). You can be sure that they will not boast.

In contrast, children and adults who have obvious success are usually confident. If they do not veer off into conceit, they tend to be comfortable. Settled. Secure. Confidence is more valuable than money. It is the unstated goal for those who struggle with low self-worth, fear, depression, shyness, unstable relationships, and shame. When it wanes, we become hopeless or inflate ourselves with doses of positive thinking. The rock drummer Keith Moon was criticized because he was unable to tame his style for studio recordings. In response, he found confidence in being “the greatest Keith Moon-type drummer in the world.” It was a small hill on which to boast, but it seemed to work for him.

Confidence can grow in a similar way when we are connected to someone who is honorable or successful. In the movie *Good Will Hunting*, a group of friends—Boston locals—enter a bar popular among Harvard students. One member of the group is a genius but has no formal education. When another young man from the group is humiliated by a Harvard student, the genius steps in and more than one-ups the arrogant

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student. Suddenly, the once-demoralized locals transform into confident boasters because of their friendship with the new top dog. “My boy is wicked smart.”

Parents are quick to boast about the smallest achievement of their children. Their boasts are a means of honoring their child, but such honor also rubs off on the parents. It is true—our honor extends to those close to us. And it works both ways; dishonor rubs off too. The psalmist prays that his actions would never disgrace

God’s people. “Let not those who hope in you be put to shame through me, O Lord GOD of hosts” (Ps 69:6).

These recognizable illustrations rest on matters that run deep. Everyone can see that we tend to put our confidence in people and money, and neither can support our confidence, hopes, or trust. But the Spirit takes us further. He reveals that nothing in creation was intended to have such strength and permanence. We were created to rest in God alone, with certainty of his love and confidence that we are secure in him. Yet even when we know Jesus, such confidence is unstable and elusive. It seems too good to be true and at odds with our abiding sense that we are not worthy.

In the midst of these uncertainties, we can know this: God is committed to giving us “confidence for the day of judgment” (1 John 4:17), and if we can face death with confidence, we will live today with confidence. Will your head be lifted up when you see Jesus face-to-face, or will you be tempted to look away? The apostles were resolute in their desire to give you confidence for that day. Without it, hope—an essential feature of life itself—is in ruins. The apostle Paul, of course, will have

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