

Dog tales: Galatians 6:7-16

by [Samuel Wells](#) in the [June 29, 2004](#) issue

We were at the lake, my daily walking spot. I had brought a friend who needed to talk. Her head was down as if she were searching for meaning, hope and traces of God's ways in the ruts of the muddy path. My head was down too, in silent solidarity. We walked.

Suddenly I missed a familiar pitter-patter—my dog was nowhere to be seen. I'd been deep in conversation and hadn't missed her—for how long? Ten—15 minutes? I looked behind and ahead on the trail. I looked around the fishing jetties, wondering if she was bothering the fishermen with her high energy and playful spirit. No sign.

Then I looked out into the lake. A bobbing golden head was gaining on the rigid form of a duck. My dog had never swum that far. How far could she go? Was she the best judge? My concentration wavered and my conversation partner looked up and saw the dog. Her tragedy seemed a little less significant as we watched my dog emerge from the water and shake herself dry over a fisherman. It was remarkable! She had swum across the whole lake! My heart burst with pride.

I boasted, but with no guilt, for it felt like the most unambiguous boast of my life. After all, it broke almost none of the subtle social taboos of the genre. Don't boast about your children, because whether it's nature or nurture, it's a pretty straightforward way of giving yourself the credit. Don't boast about your partner, because he or she is not there to make you look good. Don't boast about your possessions or your achievements—there's bound to be a Freudian in the room who'll point out that you are displacing your desire for something more significant in the way of bodily attributes or fulfilling relationships. If you want people to like you, develop ways of talking humorously about your shortcomings so that you don't attract sympathy but build a supportive community.

Everyone knows all this. At least, when one comes across someone who doesn't, the shrewd strategy is obvious. We don't need to hear about your wacky holidays, new car, gifted toddler, or your proximity to putting perfection. That's not the way it's done. Be more subtle. If you want people to know you're rich, don't tell them: adorn

yourself with clothes or jewelry that reveals your refined taste only on close inspection. If you want people to know you read, don't tell them: show them your office or study and let them browse the bookshelves. If you want people to know you work hard, meet them for breakfast and make it clear that the morning is already half over for you.

These are the rules. This is how to boast. Break the rules and you look a fool—big, brave, brainy or not. Keep the rules, and admiration may be yours. You will have immortal acclaim—or some worthwhile customized version of it.

But why do you want it? Why do you want people to think you are beautiful or stylish, clever or funny or wise? These qualities are like the "tribute" that ancient kingdoms paid to a foreign power to stave off invasion. "Don't hate me or reject me," we say, "don't look at my soul—look at my book collection, my medals, my conquests. You have to like me now, or at least admire me." Deep down, do any of us really believe that shorn of our hard-won attributes, our "tribute," we would, in our nakedness, be acceptable to or longed for by the yearning God?

Paul seeks no admiration from his peers. He offers no "tribute"; he does not enter the game of boasting—subtle or unsubtle. There is only one thing people need to realize in getting to know Paul, and it is the most humiliating thing imaginable: Jesus died on a cross. It is not an achievement, quality or possession; it is not something beautiful or stylish; it is not even something about Paul himself at all. But it is all that Paul wants you to know about him. All that matters.

Fancy being free of that subtle game of image and admiration. Fancy leaving behind the deft play for advantage in every social interaction. Would that not be freedom? Would that life not be a "new creation"? Christ took up the least admirable, the most ugly, the least classy path to death, and thereby showed that he is unimpressed by any kind of boast, subtle or unsubtle. Fundamentally, we don't need "tributes" when we have love. We boast only in the freedom that releases us from the culture of boasting. That culture of tribute, of boasting, of fear is what Paul means by "the world."

I look back on that moment with my dog as a small glimpse of Paul's notion of boasting. For what I experienced was neither pride in my genes nor glory in my dog-handling (she had, after all, disobeyed by running and swimming away), but sheer exultation in the joy of being alive, in the thrill of water, and in affection for waggy

dogs' tails. I loved my dog, and I didn't care who knew it. This is the joy of creation, and this was the swell of my boast.

But there is an even greater love, a greater pride, a greater boasting in the joy of the new creation, the joy that is founded on nothing in me at all, but is simply the naked love of God displayed on the cross. If my heart burst for the love of a dog, what will it do for the love of God?