

Rejoicing in Boastings

by Charles Finney

The sermon calls for humility by emphasizing that all achievements are gifts from God, warning against self-complacency and boasting.

Scripture: Proverbs 16:18, Isaiah 42:8, Romans 12:3, 1 Corinthians 4:7, 2 Corinthians 3:5, Galatians 6:14, Ephesians 2:8-9, Philippians 2:13, James 4:16, 1 Peter 5:5-6

Topics: "Humility", "The Danger of Pride"

Description

Charles Finney emphasizes the danger of self-complacency and the wickedness of rejoicing in our own boastings, as highlighted in James 4:16. He explains that true prosperity, influence, and spiritual attainments are gifts from God, and any pride in these areas is a denial of His grace. Finney warns that self-complacency leads to spiritual pride, which can grieve the Holy Spirit and hinder our relationship with God. He urges believers to recognize that all good comes from God and to rejoice in Him rather than in their own accomplishments. Ultimately, he calls for humility and a focus on God's grace as the source of all goodness in our lives.

Transcript

"But now ye rejoice in your boastings; all such rejoicing is evil." James 4:16

In discussing this subject I shall show,

I. WHEN ONE MAY BE SAID TO REJOICE IN HIS BOASTINGS.

II. THE WICKEDNESS OF SUCH BOASTINGS.

1. When we have a self-complacent spirit. For example, when we feel a self-complacent joy in view of our worldly prosperity; when we look on our worldly prosperity as resulting from our own providence, prudence, economy or goodness, without giving the glory to God as the Author and Giver of every perfect gift. When we do not recognize him as not only ordering the outward circumstances, but as giving such directions to our thoughts and efforts as to secure this prosperity. If our worldly prosperity has been brought about in a manner consistent with honesty and Christian integrity, God is of course to have the glory of so working providentially without us, and so working by his Spirit within us to will and to do, as to have secured this result; so that the glory belongs to him. It is grace which has secured this result, and what have we that we did not receive? and who has made us in this respect to differ from others? Why

then should we boast, and be self-complacent? Why should we take credit to ourselves, as if these things were not a gift? Whenever we do so, we rejoice in our boastings. But if our worldly prosperity has resulted from any dishonesty whatever, then of course to indulge in self-complacency, is not only to rejoice in our boastings, but to rejoice in our villainy.

2. To indulge in a spirit of self-complacency on account of our influence in the world is rejoicing in our boastings.

First, because if our influence is great and good, grace working within us, by the Spirit, and providentially without us, has secured this result, and all the merit we can claim is that we yielded, or suffered ourselves to be persuaded by the infinite entreaties and persuasion of God to do our duty. Being as it were over-persuaded, we yielded, and when our reluctance was overcome, we consented to take the course that has given us this influence, and in this sense alone have we any reason to be self-complacent.

But in how much higher sense does all the glory belong to God, who from his own self-originated goodness set himself to persuade us, and persevered until he did persuade us to take such a course as secured this influence. What reason then have we for self-complacency? Verily, none at all. And whenever we indulge it on account of our influence we rejoice in our boastings.

But if our influence is evil, to be self-complacent in that, is not only to rejoice in our boastings but to boast of our shameless wickedness.

3. When we are self-complacent on account of our intellectual attainments. If they are great, or whatever they are, it is a gift of God. He created our intellect. He has so arranged his providences as to give us opportunity to cultivate it. He has also by his providence without, and his working within, secured the application of our minds in such a manner as to develop our intelligence. And now in what sense have we a right to be self-complacent? Have we studied hard? It is because he has so constituted us, so arranged his providences, and all the circumstances of the case, as to persuade us to study hard. He has overcome our sluggishness, and pressed us onward by ten thousand influences without and within us, and secured this result. And now, do we take the credit to ourselves? verily this is rejoicing in our boastings.

4. When we indulge self-complacency in regard to our spiritual attainments, we rejoice in our boastings.

But I am almost ready to say that these things are incompatible: that is, that self-complacency in respect to our spiritual attainments, would demonstrate that we have made no spiritual attainments at all. But it is undoubtedly true that sometimes persons who have made some spiritual attainments, afterwards become self-complacent, and develop a disgusting amount of spiritual pride, or which is the same thing, rejoicing in their boastings. But why should we be self-complacent on account of any degree of spiritual attainments? We were totally dead in trespasses and sins. God began a work within us by first convicting us, creating desires, setting aside our cavils with all long-suffering, and persevering in the midst of all our obstinacy, rebellion, and sin, and using the most persuasive means to obtain our consent to be spiritual at all. He has never gained one step with us only by pressing us with truths and providences, so arranging his providences without and so enlightening us by his Spirit within, as to overcome our utter reluctance, enmity, and spiritual death, and after a protracted struggle, at last to gain our consent to follow him and be saved. His Spirit has never succeeded in making us spiritually-minded, any farther than he has anticipated all our movements toward himself, by first moving toward us, and beginning to call up our attention and press us with such considerations as to overcome our apathy, enmity, and unbelief, and finally succeeded in bringing forth the voluntary result of our present degree of spirituality. Prompted by his own sovereign

goodness, he has thus moved on us, worked in us to will and to do--surrounded us without and enlightened us within, and at last got our consent. Now I ask, how much reason have we for self-complacency? And in how low a sense can it be said that we are worthy of praise? True we have been free. But it is also true that our liberty has been abused and used only in opposition to God, until finally overcome with his persevering and overpowering persuasions. True, we have done our duty at last. But why have we done it? Because God in the abundance of his grace has persevered till he has over-persuaded us, and finally wrung out from us our consent.

But observe in how much higher sense does the glory belong to God than to us. Verily instead of being self-complacent we have reason to take to ourselves the utmost shame that it should cost God all this effort to overcome our reluctance, and persuade us to do our duty. Are we to ascribe glory to ourselves, to be self-complacent, to plume ourselves, and rejoice in our own goodness? It is infinitely more reasonable to hide our faces in the dust, and to say we are unprofitable servants. We have only done that which it was our duty to do, and even that we have not done only as we have been overcome by the persuasions and pleadings of infinite and persevering goodness.

Again. When we give ourselves up to rejoicing in our spiritual state, instead of rejoicing in God, we always rejoice in our boastings. I have seen persons who seem to me to be watching their spiritual state, and to be contemplating their own feelings, with a kind of self-complacency, from day to day. They remind me of a peacock when he struts in the sun-beams, and turns his head from side to side and views his gorgeous tail. He seem to delight himself in his own beauty and to be taken up with rejoicing in the glory of his own appearance. He struts and seems to say, "What is so beautiful as this? Am I not the most beautiful of birds? And have I not more reason to carry my head high than any others of the feathered tribe? Indeed I am quite satisfied with my own exquisite beauty." Now some persons seem to be taken up in the same way. They have worked themselves into a kind of ecstasy; have got certain views, as they say, of Christ that have brought their sensibility into a very happy state. They seem to be saying, "God I thank thee that I am not as other men are, that I am not in bondage like this legalist." In words they ascribe the glory to God, just as the Pharisee must have done who is contrasted with the publican. It must be that in theory at least he ascribed his pretended goodness to God; else he could not have thanked God that he was so good, for why should he have thanked God unless in theory at least he ascribed his righteousness to God? "God," he says, "I thank thee that I am not as other men are, or even as this publican." Now I have seen some that appeared to be precisely in this state of mind from day to day. Instead of rejoicing in God, they seem to be taken up with their own state of mind. They are contemplating what they call their own peace and their own goodness. The state of their sensibility is with them the chief subject of attention, and source of self-complacency. While they are practically inefficient in the kingdom of God [and] are doing nothing to pull sinners out of the fire or to sanctify the saints, they still have a wonderful degree of self-complacency on account of their state of mind. Now this is nothing but rejoicing in their boastings. How infinitely different from the publican, who, standing afar off, and not daring so much as to lift up his eyes to heaven, smote upon his breast and cried, "God be merciful to me, a sinner." By this I do not intend to teach that a man must be conscious all the while of committing sin in order to be accepted of God, or that a sense of our sinfulness is in itself an evidence that we are accepted of God. But I do mean that a person in a right state of mind is never taken up with a self-complacent view of his goodness. But his rejoicings are always in God and never in himself.

Again, when we cherish self-complacency on account of our usefulness, we rejoice in our boastings. If we have been useful, to whom does the glory belong? If any good has been done through us, by whom has it

been done? Has God done this, or have we done it? If we have so much as intended to do any good, God has begotten and perpetuated in us this intention. If this intention has been carried out, and has secured the desired result, why do we glory? It is God who has worked within and without. He has moved us to these efforts, and he has secured these results. What though we have been free, yet he has over-persuaded us to use our liberty as we have. Nothing but the most strenuous efforts on the part of God have ever secured in us an effort to do any thing good. He has overcome our reluctance, he has put away our slothfulness, he has quickened our death, and surrounded us, within and without, with such influences as to lead us in this way in spite of all the natural tendency of our minds in an opposite direction. Surely, if any good has been done, the glory belongs to God. Shame and confusion of face belongs to us, that it has been so difficult for God to persuade us even to intend any good. What though we did at last intend it: what though he finally prevailed on us: let us take shame rather than praise to ourselves. Surely God has done it. He has worked in us to will and to do of his own good pleasure, and with great pains taking, has, through us, wrought some good results. And are we indulging ourselves in self-complacency in consequence of some good which has resulted from our labors? Shame, where is thy blush? All such rejoicings are rejoicings in our boastings.

Again, we rejoice in our boastings whenever we congratulate ourselves on account of the high stand we have taken on any moral question. If the stand we have taken be right, who has secured this result? Where should we have gone if not led and overcome by grace divine? Has not God paved all the way, guided us by his eye, lifted us up with his hands, and brought all the influences to bear, both within and without us, that have finally over-persuaded us, and brought us to take right grounds? And are we the persons to be self-complacent? What if a man who was bent on murder should with the greatest possible pains-taking be persuaded to relinquish his object, and then plume himself on his virtue in abstaining from the bloody deed? Ought he not rather to say, "'God be merciful to me a sinner!' It was in my heart to have committed this horrible deed, and hadst thou not over-persuaded me by thy goodness, confounded and broken me down, and turned me away from this infernal project, my hands had now been red with a brother's blood! Be sure the glory all belongs to God."

So it is with whatever right ground is taken by us on any subject. Instead of being self-complacent, it becomes us rather to say, "God be merciful to me a sinner." It was in our hearts to have said and done any thing else than what was right--to have taken any other stand than a right one. But, O Lord, thou hast persuaded us, and we have suffered ourselves to be persuaded.

Again, whenever we complacently regard ourselves as the objects of divine favor, we rejoice in our boastings. Suppose God blesses us, gives us his Spirit, makes us useful, enlarges us in any respect, and we feel self-complacent on this account, and rejoice in it as if he had blessed us on account of our own goodness, and intended to bear a testimony of our favor; this is rejoicing in our boastings. Why may not the veriest sinner that was ever converted take the same ground, and say that God has converted him because he was so good, or the veriest backslider that was ever reclaimed say that God has given him reclaiming grace because he was so good, and acceptable to God in his backslidings? The fact is, whenever we regard God's favors as a testimony of our own goodness, or as being bestowed on us on account of our own worthiness, we are always rejoicing in our boastings. All favors bestowed on us, are bestowed for an infinitely different reason, only for the sake of him who died for us and rose again.

Again, when we fail to recognize the fact that it is not for our sakes, but for his own name's sake that we receive any thing from his hand better than hell, we are rejoicing in our boastings. We have deserved nothing but a dire damnation, and he takes particular pains to say to us, it is 'not for your sakes, be it

known unto you that I do these things, but for my great name's sake;" and whenever we fail to recognize this truth, and indulge a self-complacent spirit on account of any favors received, whether temporal or spiritual, we are always rejoicing in our boastings.

Again, whenever we fail to recognize the fact that he works all our goodness in us, and that too in spite of our natural obstinacy, and determination to have our own way. When I speak of his working love or goodness in us, I do not mean to imply that we are not free, moral agents. I do not mean that we are not in a sense co-workers with him, for we really are, voluntarily; and the way in which he works in us is as I have already intimated, by over-persuading us, over-coming us by his powerful persuasions, and drawing us by these in an opposite direction from that in which we should have gone, if we had been left to ourselves, so that in every instance, in which we are conscious of doing our duty, we are to know assuredly that we should not have done it unless God by his grace had secured this result in us in spite of all our natural obstinacy and tendency in an opposite direction.

Again, whenever we fail to recognize all the good done to others through our instrumentality as being so absolutely God's work through the agency of his Spirit in us and with us that we have no ground whatever for the least glory or self-complacency.

Again, whenever with self-complacency we compare ourselves with others in any respect. It is reported of Whitfield, that on seeing a poor drunkard reeling along the streets, he exclaimed with tears, "But for the grace of God, there goes George Whitfield." Paul could say, "By the grace of God I am what I am." Now in whatever respect we may be better than others, in better circumstances outwardly, or in a better state inwardly, we have no reason whatever for boasting. "Who hath made you to differ from another? or what hast thou that thou didst not receive?" says Paul. "But if thou didst receive it, why boastest thou thyself as if thou hast not received it?" If we are better than others, it is only because God has in his wisdom and benevolence secured this result. It was not because we were any better by nature, for we belong to the mass of fallen humanity. We are by nature the children of wrath, even as others, we are only brands plucked out of the burning, are only a little clay, taken from the common lump and molded by the potter, and are in no respect better, more praise-worthy than others, even the vilest of mankind, only as divine grace has overcome our downward tendency, and over-persuaded us until we have been subdued, and at last given our consent to be thus molded. Brethren, did you see that vile drunkard lying there in the ditch? Did you see his bloated face, his blood-shot eyes, his almost naked carcass rotting in the gutter? As soon as he could speak did you hear him swear and blaspheme? Did you find him the very image of every thing that is loathsome and abominable in human nature? Now mark me, brother; but for the grace of God that is yourself. Had not the grace and sovereign goodness of God surrounded you, wrought within you and without you, to secure different results, you had today been like him, or perhaps even worse. And if you are not as degraded and wicked and miserable, as any sinner either in or out of hell, no thanks to you. You have no reason for self-complacency. God has brought this about, and all that you can say is that he wrought you over with his grace and his providence, within and without you, till he at last secured your consent.

Woman; are you priding yourself on your modesty, chastity, your comeliness without, or purity within! See that vile harlot. She sits before you on the curb-stone of one of our great cities. She is drunk. She has lost her bonnet, her shoes. She is ragged, polluted, disgraced, profane, a wretch too loathsome to look upon, and too degraded to be thought of without disgust. Now mark me, but for the sovereign grace of God you had been in that harlot's place. To be sure you have been free and voluntary in all your ways. But O! had not sovereign grace been busy arranging all the elements without you, and keeping up a busy play of

thought and motive within you; had not God plied you with ten thousand moving considerations, arranged all his plans from eternity, laid all his trains, pressed every consideration and brought about things as he has until he has really persuaded you and overcome your reluctance, where had you been but in the gutter, in a brothel or in hell today? And now mark me again, in what respect soever any man or woman is any better in character or in any better circumstances than the damned in hell, the vilest of the vile, the most dissolute of the dissolute, the most profane of the profane, the most abominable of the abominable, it is owing to the grace of God only. Grace has persuaded you to all this, and all the virtue you have is, that after great reluctance, you have barely suffered yourselves to be persuaded. Now is it for you or me to be self-complacent, to boast ourselves above others, to take the Pharisee's place and thank God on account of our own goodness? Shall we boast of our prudence on our worldly affairs, or of our efforts in our spiritual affairs? Shall we look around on the world of mankind and breathe out a selfish complacent breath, or shall we cry out, "God be merciful to us, sinners." "But for thy glorious sovereign and preserving grace, we should have been as wicked and as miserable as any of the damned in hell."

Whenever we take credit for being better than the worst, or less miserable than the most miserable, whenever we indulge the least self-complacency in the comparison of ourselves with any other human beings, or even with any devils in hell, we are rejoicing in our boastings.

Again, when we ascribe to our own wisdom or prudence any success which may attend our efforts in any direction, we are rejoicing in our boastings. Who has developed this wisdom and prudence? And who has directed us in this way, and secured this result? Verily God! And to him belongs all the glory.

Again, when we ascribe to our own virtue the avoidance of any crime, we are rejoicing in our boastings. Whenever we say we should not have been guilty of such and such a crime, or that we should have done thus and thus, which is better than others have done, and have the least self-complacency in these sayings, we don't know ourselves. We are abusing God. We are rejoicing in our boastings.

Again, when we have the slightest confidence in ourselves we should do any good, that we should avoid any crime, in short, when we have the slightest confidence in ourselves, in any respect whatever, we are rejoicing in our boastings. For surely we can be depended on for nothing but to sin, and only sin, and that continually, if left to ourselves. And in just so far as we fail to recognize this fact, we rejoice in our boastings. If we imagine that there is anything within us that is any part of ourselves, or for which we have the least occasion to boast, that can secure us against any crime however horrid, we are deceiving ourselves, and are rejoicing in our own boastings.

Again, when we have any confidence at all in the efficiency of our own resolutions, and purposes of good. Whenever we comfort ourselves with the idea that these purposes of ours, will secure any good result whatever unsustained by the grace of God, we are deceived and playing the fool, and are rejoicing in our boastings.

Again, whenever we fall short of recognizing the fact that in us apart from grace, there dwelleth no good thing--that whatever attainment we may have made in holiness, still holiness could not live in us except as it is constantly sustained by the divine presence and energy, we deceive ourselves. If we imagine that any attainments in holiness are so thoroughly made, that any virtue is so lodged within us, that it will live a moment if the Holy Spirit is withdrawn, we are deceived. And whenever we comfort ourselves with any such ideas as these, we are rejoicing in our boastings.

Again, when we overlook the fact that all our tendencies are downward, away from heaven, away from God and towards the depths of hell, we are deceiving ourselves.

Again, whenever we fall short of what the most spiritual saints call self-annihilation, in respect to everything that is good, we are rejoicing in our boastings. By self-annihilation in this connection, is not meant that we are not active agents in obeying God; but that our activity and free agency are so overruled and directed by the grace of God, working without and within us, as to secure a result which is the opposite of what had taken place, but for this divine agency.

II. Show the wickedness of rejoicing in our boastings.

1. It is wicked because it is rejoicing in a most pernicious falsehood. It is infinitely far from true that we have any good reason for self-complacency. On the other hand it is true that we have infinite reason to be ashamed of our wickedness, our great and astonishing aversion both to do and to be any thing which we ought to do or be. And for us to rejoice in ourselves, is a rejoice in our boastings. The least degree of self-complacency in us, is infinitely inconsistent with reason and truth.

Again, it is wicked because it is unjust to take credit to ourselves. The praise belongs to God. All goodness originates with him. He has at the greatest expense and with the greatest pains-taking barely secured our consent; and shall we after all this persuasion pride ourselves for being barely overcome by his strong persuasions and influences, so that we merely consent to do our duty?

Again, this is wicked because it is really robbing God of his glory; that is, it is attempting to rob him, and is taking credit to ourselves where the credit belongs to him only.

Again, for us to take the credit to ourselves, is denying the work and grace of the Holy Spirit.

Again, it is overlooking and denying the providence of God without and the grace of God within, that has secured all these results.

Again, it is a virtual denial of the Bible. For the Bible takes the ground that we have no reason for self-complacency, but infinite reason for humiliation and self-loathing.

Again, all self-complacency is spiritual pride, is infinitely unreasonable and odious in the sight of God. It is setting aside the gospel and is opposition to God.

REMARKS.

1. It is very important to understand the views of inspired writers on this subject. Hear Paul. "I labored more abundantly than they all, yet not I, but the grace of God that was with me." Again, "I am crucified with Christ, yet I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me; and the life that I now live in the flesh, I live by the faith of the Son of God," and not by my own faith. Inspired writers seem fully to have recognized the truth of this discourse, and everywhere insist that God works all our good works in us; that it is God that worketh in us to will and do of his own good pleasure; and in short, that it is sovereign almighty grace that secures all human virtue.

2. There is a great deal of rejoicing in our boastings. It is amazing to see how much of this there is of which persons are not themselves aware. The egotism and filthy boasting with which the world and even the church are filled, must be infinitely disgusting and abominable in the sight of God.

3. It is to be feared that there is a great deal of this boasting in spirit, where there is but little of it in form. Often, no doubt, much is ascribed in words to the grace of God, of which men give the glory to themselves and not to God.

4. No person gets clear of rejoicing in his boastings, unless he apprehends what it is to be "in Christ Jesus;" to live by the faith of the Son of God. To have that faith, patience, love, meekness, gentleness, goodness, and all the graces of Christ developed within himself until he understands what it is to put off self and put on Christ in the sense of becoming dead to his own goodness, and alive only in the life and activity of Jesus Christ.

5. Again, I remark that just in proportion as persons become really holy, they are indisposed to take any credit to themselves. Nothing is more offensive and infinitely abominable, shocking, and disgusting to a sanctified soul than self-complacency. Every shade and every degree of it is loathsome as the very filth of hell.

6. It is often very difficult to speak exactly the language of our own feelings and sentiments on this subject. We find Paul, as it were, often over-hauling himself. When he has spoken of himself as being good, or as having done any thing good, he speaks as if he would take it back, and say--not I, not I, but Christ that dwelleth in me.

7. From this subject it is easy to see how Christians get into darkness. Whenever they indulge in the least self-complacency in any respect, they sin, grieve the Spirit of God, and get into darkness. Oftentimes they seem to be entirely ignorant of the cause of their darkness. They look around and ask wherein they have sinned. Finding nothing in their outward conduct to accuse themselves of, they are at a great loss to account of this spiritual desertion. Now if they would but direct their minds to thoughts and feelings indulged, they would often learn that they have been at least dividing the glory and praise of their goodness with God. They have been stealing from God. They have been secretly filching a jewel from the diadem of Christ, and would fain place it as a crown on their own head.

8. Spiritual pride, or rejoicing in our boastings is one of the most common forms of backsliding. How few persons there are that can bear prosperity, temporal or spiritual, without indulging in self-complacency, and thus grieving away the Spirit of God. This no doubt, more frequently than any thing else, causes the young convert to stumble. He stumbles without knowing at what he stumbles. He becomes spiritually proud without observing it. He rejoices in his own boastings, and falls, and sadly dishonors God.

9. Revivals of religion are more frequently put down by this sin than by any other. The minister and the lay brethren are powerfully moved by divine grace, and bestir themselves. God pours out his Spirit and a revival ensues. Directly they begin to be self-complacent. God is blessing their labors. They begin to tell what I have done, and what I have done, and how God blessed me in this labor and in that -- how this sermon, and that exhortation, and that prayer, and that fast had resulted thus and thus. And perhaps ever and anon there is a little puff in the newspaper, and a self-complacent sending out and trumpeting of our own fame, that the world and the church may hear. The Spirit of God is grieved; he turns away his face; he withholds his hand. Young converts stumble, sinners return to stupidity, the church return every one to his own way, and desolation drives its plough-share over the fair heritage of God.

10. Many persons apparently good have so rejoiced in boastings, that God seems to have left them. This has been true of ministers oftentimes--of those who have labored as evangelists, awhile successfully--of many laymen who have once known what it was to prevail with God. They have rejoiced in their boastings

until God has forsaken them. He has thrown them aside, and there they lie and rot; and if they escape the depths of hell, it will be only by the persevering grace of God.

11. This subject ought to be a warning to all classes.

12. We are never right only as we lose sight of self, and rejoice only in the Lord, and glory only in the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. Persons are never so nearly right as when they have the least apprehension of being right--as when they have the least thought of their own comeliness and virtue--when they are the most completely empty of all thoughts of their own goodness, and their minds are most entirely absorbed with the consideration of the goodness of God, and when all the powers of the mind are directed away from the contemplation of self, and most engrossed with the work of the Lord, the goodness and the infinite grace of God.

13. Persons who are really in a sanctified state, are not occupied with rejoicing in themselves. If they are really sanctified, it is impossible that they should be thus engaged in self-complacent rejoicing. For when sanctified, they are really emptied of all self-complacent rejoicings, and filled only with a sense of the adorable and sovereign grace of God. And with the utmost loathing and abhorrence of themselves, as for themselves they can say with all their hearts, "In me, that is, in my flesh, there dwelleth no good thing." "By the grace of God alone, I am what I am."

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