

Vicious victory

By [Evan D. Garner](#)

February 26, 2013

Winning is dangerous. Whether you hoist the Lombardi Trophy or accept a golden statuette on stage, receiving the top prize in your field can lead to trouble. How many celebrated athletes and movie stars have crashed and burned just as the bubbles of success threatened to lift their feet off the ground? Similarly, those same challenges extend all the way down to victories in the most humble of venues. On the golf course, on the playground, in the classroom—winners of all sorts run the risk of confusing victory with accomplishment.

Although my own victories have been small and often obscure, I recognize a treacherous tendency in my own celebrations to take credit where credit is not due. How did I finally manage to beat my boss playing golf? Why did our kickball team win the big game? What made me successful in my run for class president? The short and deadly answer in each of those cases is “me.” I made that long putt on the seventeenth green. I caught that line-drive and doubled-up the runner on second base. I gave the speech of my life and won over my fourth-grade classmates. But that only tells half of the story.

Sometimes we win simply because someone else loses. An opponent’s last-minute interception does not take away from our victory, but it does remind us that there are as many reasons that one side loses as there are that the other side wins. When Moses addressed God’s people in [Deuteronomy 9](#), it seems that he knew that his compatriots would struggle to stay grounded in their victory over the inhabitants of the land that they were entering: “When the LORD your God thrusts them out before you, do not say to yourself, ‘It is because of my righteousness that the LORD has brought me in to occupy this land’; it is rather because of the wickedness of these nations that the LORD is dispossessing them before you.” The pride of victory can be especially dangerous when God is thought to be on your side.

Over the centuries, human beings repeatedly have cited divine right as the justification for their actions and the explanation of their victories. In doing so, however, we have often fallen victim to the sin of pride, which, at its root, involves casting God in our image rather than seeking to be conformed to the image of our creator. What is God's will in a particular circumstance? Our tendency is simply to ask the winning side. Moses' warning to Israel, however, is a warning to us that such celebratory gusto often mistakes a gracious gift for a personal accomplishment.

The season of Lent is typically marked by prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. That three-fold pattern of spiritual discipline has the ability to transform our pride into humility by reminding us that all that we are given is just that—a gift. As I come to God in prayer, I am reminded of his impetus behind all things as creator and sustainer. As I give up some of the sustenance I usually consume, I discover how to eat without taking food for granted. As I give away some of my possessions, I learn to count all that I have as blessing. Through these forty days of preparation, I am patterned into the sort of person who can glimpse the gift behind all the successes that I enjoy. Ultimately, embracing the gift of new and everlasting life with God in heaven requires us to recognize that this life, too, is God's gift to us.

Originally posted at [A Long Way From Home](#)