

An introduction of this week's author:

We have enjoyed the company of our oldest son, Jonathan and his wife Lauren. As doting grandparents we have also enjoyed being with their three children, Miles Julian, Henry Robert and the latest addition to the Popes, Jane Evelyn! Jonathan is a teacher at Trinitas Christian School in Florida. Since he was visiting, I asked him to write our column this week. I know you will be blessed by his insights in this very timely article.

On New Year's Resolutions

When Paul was preaching to the Athenians on Mars Hill, he directed their attention to one of their own pagan temples, the Temple to the Unknown God. In a brilliant rhetorical move, Paul identifies that god as Yahweh, the God of Israel Who was made flesh in Jesus Christ. The beauty of this argument is that Paul uses their own religion to preach Christ. The Temple to the Unknown God revealed a cry of the Greek heart to know the Creator, and this cry is answered only by an encounter with the risen Lord.

Christians in the world are, like Paul, pilgrims in a foreign country. Like the Athenians in Paul's day, contemporary secularism vaunts its pseudo-knowledge over and above all other ways. But, like ancient Greece, our land is dotted with temples to unknown gods - sanctuaries where the cries of human hearts go up to a God whom they do not know. Not all worldly actions qualify to be temples - only those that have become religious. In other words, worldly actions become pagan temples when they become regular, when they become institutions. It is worthwhile for Christians to take note of worldly institutions because, as temples to unknown gods, they reveal much about the human heart and the gospel which heals all hearts. (And here I am not speaking of literal human institutions such as Harvard University, although one might, but rather institutionalized behavior.)

As we examine the celebration of the New Year, one of the first things we notice is that it is worldly. I'm not using this term necessarily in a pejorative sense, that is, *sinful*, but rather to distinguish it from sacred holidays such as Christmas or Easter. All who are in the world (including those who are not *of* the world) celebrate the new year. I'm not sure why a non-Christian would celebrate the Feast of Pentecost. I don't expect non-Americans to celebrate President's Day. And I don't expect Martians to observe the New Year (at least not on January 1). But if you are an Earthling on New Year's Eve, I fully expect you to count down to midnight with at least a little anxiousness in your guts.

Every year, there is a religious outpouring of worldly behavior surrounding the new year. Rituals abound: the party hats, the noise makers, the fireworks, the kisses. Let us examine one particular tradition: the New Year's Resolution. I want to ask a very simple question: Why do people make New Year's Resolutions? As institutionalized human behavior, and thus, religious behavior, I assume that this question is similar to the question "Why do Athenians build temples to Unknown Gods?" - and, therefore, I assume that their answers are similar. Why do people of the world make New Year's resolutions? - *because they are groping in the darkness for God*. But how do we arrive at this answer? And how does the gospel affect this phenomenon?

Because we live in a consumerist culture, perhaps the best gauge for secular values can be found in mass marketing strategies. You want to put your finger on the pulse of American values? Turn on your television. Pay attention to bill-boards. I've heard it suggested that Valentine's Day is a holiday invented by greeting card companies. This joke is brought to you by the intimate relationship companies forge between their products and the mass ethos expressed around holidays. On days like New Year's, advertisers tap into a preexisting mood in the culture. Since New Year's is a time for resolutions, we are inundated with advertisements for health club memberships, language learning programs, fitness equipment, online dating services, etc. Unlike Christmas advertisements where the emphasis seems to be

on spoiling yourself and others around you, the New Year's advertisements are geared towards self-improvement. We don't spoil ourselves with treadmills or indulge in a year-long course in German. We've had plenty of indulgence, and now that the New Year approaches, we sober up and seriously think about cleaning up our acts.

New Year's is the proverbial clean slate, symbolized by the chubby baby with top hat replacing the tired old man of yesteryear. We see not just the year as being new, but we ourselves are made to feel like babies in newness and freshness. What happened in 2007 stays in 2007. This new year is the time to start over. Old things are passed away, behold all things have become new. In this way, the secular observance of the new year by making resolutions is a temple to an unknown god. It is the collective cry of a billion hearts to be improved, to be forgiven, to have the past washed away and to be made new again.

But perhaps this is too cynical. Perhaps people make resolutions because they are proud of their past improvements and desire to continue their self-betterment. We do this at New Year's because we like to chart our success. We want to remember that 2008 was the year we really did it. At any rate, resolutions are all about self-improvement.

All men are made in the image of God. We are all made to reflect the Creator back into the creation. Some of the most basic human needs indicate this image - the universal love expressed between mothers and their children, the universal principles of justice governing the societies of the world. In the New Year's resolution we see something of the spirit of Adam. Adam's sin was not that he wanted to be like God. Indeed, the plan has always been complete union between God and man through the God-man, Jesus Christ. Christians are commanded to be like Christ, to be like God. Adam's sin was that he disobeyed God's command. He sought his own improvement on terms other than God's. He turned from divine improvement to self-improvement. And he has been trying to improve himself ever since. Consider the Tower of Babel or the hubris of the Roman Empire.

The Christian way is all about resolution, but it is in a remarkably different spirit than that of the world. The gospel comes to the heart crying out for improvement and says, "You will not only be improved, but you will become a new creature." Becoming a Christian is not a matter of cleaning up one's act. No, it is more radical than that. It is a new way to be human. It is as significant as the Velveteen Rabbit's transformation from a stuffed animal to *being real*. Unlike the New Year's resolution, this change is not worked through self-determination and effort, which we could boast in a year later. Rather, it is through Christ's death transferred to us in the crucifixion of our fleshly nature that makes it possible for us to be buried with him in baptism and raised to newness of life. Like a seed that dies and is planted in the ground we rise up as new things altogether. And this is all a work of grace.

Finally, we can see the secular practice of New Year's resolutions as a faint copy of the improvement we must all undergo in Christ. As we approach this season, it's fine for us to make resolutions, but we need not do so as the pagans. In other words, it should not be a special time for resolutions. The Christian life is all about resolution. It is very much about our improvement, but it is not self-improvement. Secularists feel this need but they seek self-improvement. Our improvement is from God. Those who are in Christ are daily being made into Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. But we are not merely passive, for God is transforming our very wills. Daily, we resolve to crucify our fleshly nature. We resolve to love others. We resolve to worship God.

So let us make resolutions this year. But let us not stop short at the shallow copies the world gives us in fitness regimens and other forms of self-betterment. Let us look beyond these fleshly things and see the radical change we Christians have been set apart to undergo. Let us open our hearts to God's transforming power as he continues to conform us into the image of His Son, Jesus.

- Jonathan Pope

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