

“Alas, my dear brethren, we are poor stuff, and we should count very little upon our good resolutions!” – St. John Vianney

When We Are Left To Ourselves

By Ricky McRoskey

New Year’s resolutions often come across as cute. We know the ritual: At the end of every year, in the paper’s “Lifestyle” section, tucked between articles on books and interior decorating, there’s a charming Top 10 list on how to work out more or smoke less in 2018. Usually, there are some tongue-in-cheek quotes from personal trainers or self-help authors.

It makes it easy to forget that, at its heart, the New Year’s resolution is not just something endearing or useful. If you peel it back, you find evidence in it of something far more profound: a prayer.



The first and most important thing to know about resolutions is that they speak to something greater than themselves. That we want to make a resolution at all is an acknowledgment of two things: 1) there is such a thing as goodness, and 2) we’re not perfectly good.

As trite as that sounds, it’s worth reflecting on. If I want to become a better version of myself, it means there’s some standard, some ideal, of what is good. There is such a thing as Goodness.

The second thing to know about resolutions is that they reflect what matters to us. If we looked at the vast majority of resolutions out there, we might come to conclude that Goodness consists of being kind, fit, organized, and healthy. Nothing wrong with those things. But if the only resolutions we make have to do with our blood pressure or punctuality, it tells us that these are our standard, our benchmark of goodness.

If, on the other hand, we view goodness as something bigger, harder, and wilder – like being humble, chaste, or selfless – then our resolutions should reflect that bigger view of reality. We don’t just want to learn a new language; we want to hold our tongue when gossip is easy. We don’t just want to eat more vegetables; we want to do more to feed the hungry. We don’t just want to read more books; we want to read *The Book* more.

Put another way, if God matters to us, He will make it into our New Year’s resolutions. If He doesn’t, it’s because we’re looking to another standard of goodness.



The third thing to know about resolutions is that, even if they aspire to something morally good (“I want to be more forgiving of my spouse”), they are worthless if they don’t come pre-packed with humility. St. Bernard of Clairvaux was once asked to name the four Cardinal Virtues, to which he replied, “Humility, humility, humility, and humility.” In other words, it’s the foundation of all other virtues.

If we can’t acknowledge how dependent we are on God – how hopeless, lazy, and weak we are without Him – then we fail to grasp the single most important principle of life: He’s God, and we are not. If we accomplish any good thing – we stop smoking, we donate blood, we fast on Fridays – it is only because God has given us that ability. All success, all goodness, all ingenuity is entirely His; we are the agents.

So as we set our resolutions, the starting point is to beg God for the strength to accomplish it. If we accomplish it, the next step is to recognize that God was entirely behind it. And if we fail in our New Year’s resolutions, we would do well to smile, shrug, look to the heavens above, and say with resignation what St. John Vianney once did: “Dear Lord, what we are capable of when we are left to ourselves!”

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