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1-3-2019

# New Year, New You? Unpacking the Liturgy of the New Year's Resolution

Donald Roth

*Dordt College*, [donald.roth@dordt.edu](mailto:donald.roth@dordt.edu)

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## Recommended Citation

Roth, Donald, "New Year, New You? Unpacking the Liturgy of the New Year's Resolution" (2019). *Faculty Work Comprehensive List*. 1022.

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# New Year, New You? Unpacking the Liturgy of the New Year's Resolution

## **Abstract**

"Our resolutions reveal what we value yet feel we do not live up to."

Posting about conforming to God's standard from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/new-year-new-you-unpacking-the-liturgy-of-the-new-years-resolution/>

## **Keywords**

In All Things, New Year, manners and customs, goal, culture

## **Disciplines**

Christianity

## **Comments**

*In All Things* is a publication of the [Andreas Center for Reformed Scholarship and Service](#) at Dordt College.

# in things

January 3, 2019

## **New Year, New You? Unpacking the Liturgy of the New Year's Resolution**

**Donald Roth**

One of the great traditions of American popular culture is the New Year's resolution. Surveys say somewhere between **a third and half** of all Americans make New Year's resolutions in any given year. At the same time, **as few as 19%** will consider their efforts successful two years later. It may be no surprise that we are a bit bad at changing our ways, but the ritual we go through to pursue that change is deeply meaningful. Our resolutions reveal what we value yet feel we do not live up to.

This can have deep resonance for Christians. Through resolutions, Christians acknowledge the good that we want to do. In turn, we also become more aware of how we habitually turn to the evil that we do not want to do. It is a regular confession of our difficulty with self-control and our attempt to harness our habits. There is a reason that various Christian traditions make use of the transition from the old to the new year as an opportunity for reflection, confession, and new resolution.

However, Christians do well to tread carefully in the places where deep cultural liturgies run in easy harmony with Christian practices. Our culture is not calibrated to the same desires that we claim as part of our Christianity, and these overlapping zones are often like subtle switching stations, quietly flipping us onto a different track with a different destination.

**The Liturgy of the New Year**

New Year's resolutions are, well, not new. There are records of New Year's resolutions playing a part in Babylonian religious rights 4,000 years ago and cropping up in Roman rites related to the worship of the backward and forward-looking god, Janus. Medieval knights even supposedly took the occasion as an opportunity to reaffirm their chivalric oaths (with their hands placed over a roasted peacock or pheasant), and, as I mentioned at the start, many Americans also regularly partake in this tradition.

So, what are the contours of the practice of the American New Year's resolution? To start, what is it we want to change about ourselves? According to a poll conducted by YouGov, the most popular three resolutions are eating better, exercising more, and saving more money. What we value is revealed in these resolutions: living healthy, looking fit, and having money—the very virtues exemplified for us in our celebrities and preached to us from the epistles of our self-help gospels. Of course, none of these things are bad, but none of them are ultimate. Even in the world, the pursuit of health and wealth is about what will make you desirable or envied by others. For Christians who are called to love God above all and our neighbors above ourselves, we must certainly care for our bodily temples and steward God's gifts to us; however, we must take great care that we are not drawn through these actions into the excessive self-focus that the culture around us favors.

At the same time, the ritual of self-improvement at the core of the New Year's resolution has a unique appeal to many Americans' sense of self. This past September, I reviewed a book by personality psychologist Dan McAdams that outlined the contours of the redemptive stories that Americans love to tell about themselves. The New Year's resolution is a ritual that reinforces the redemptive self, and so we do well to remember the dark sides of that American narrative. The American narrative of the redemptive self tends to be highly individualistic, and it often carries with it a naïve overconfidence in our own abilities. It can also become a way of rationalizing away our other failings. If this is the mindset we take to our resolution, is it any wonder that so many of us fail?

Lastly, while the modern American New Year's resolution may feed into a culture of narcissism, the means used to pursue these goals often march to the drumbeat of the other great cultural narrative of our time: consumerism. How do you lose weight? Buy a new diet book and a fancy juicer, and purchase a bunch of powders, oils, or other health shortcuts. How do you get fit? Purchase a gym

membership or some new exercise equipment, hire a personal trainer, and certainly get some new workout clothes. How do you save money? Here is a list of eight apps that can help you save money! When we are not who we want to be, we can buy things or look to technological shortcuts to save us. As psychologist Kima Cargill explains, we live by an “underlying belief that consumption solves rather than creates problems.”

### **(Re)calibrating our Desires**

So, it may sound like I am down on the concept of New Year’s resolutions, but that is not quite it. As I mentioned above, many Christian traditions have made fruitful use of the practice, and even earlier American practice was far less oriented toward selfish goals.<sup>1</sup> The point is that these resolutions should fit into the context of rightly ordering our desires, of pulling ourselves out of the disordering narratives of narcissism and consumption and into the Narrative of God’s Work as revealed in His Word. This doesn’t mean that we don’t resolve to lose weight (I know I certainly need to), but we must contextualize this in terms of putting off our sinful selves and taking on the mantle of righteousness.

Better yet, can we add to our list of resolutions things that consciously recalibrate us to prioritize what is most important? What about a resolution to improve our church attendance and involvement? What if we resolve to commit to times of family worship or personal devotion, to actually breathe in the Word of God more regularly? What if we resolve to set aside family time away from devices and technological distractions, to be present more for one another? What if we commit ourselves to pursuing historic Christian disciplines of prayer, fasting, hospitality, or service?

As we take to these resolutions, it is helpful to think of our task in terms of putting to death and bringing to life—because that is essentially what we are doing. To make lasting changes, we need to kill off the old neural pathways that were attuned to our bad habits and forge new ones in their place. Think of our minds like a field with paths worn across it. The deep ruts we tread in walking to the fridge every night for that late-night snack need to be plowed under; but we still need to eat, so while we are working to eradicate those ruts, we still need to get to the same place—just in a better way. It is no wonder that these things are difficult. However, we serve a gracious God who not only forgives us for our failings but also urges us on to greater holiness. The 19% that I mentioned at the

start who succeeded in their resolutions? They all failed fairly quickly, but they all picked themselves up again and continued to pursue their goals—not with the hope of just becoming a fitter version of themselves—but with a vision of becoming different people. This year, if you hope to take on some New Year’s resolution, you will do better if this change is part of changing who you think you are, and if you are undertaking something that radical, let that change be part of conforming to the heavenly pattern—and not the pattern of this world.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Consider Methodist Episcopal Bishop John Vincent’s resolution from the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century: “I will this day try to live a simple, sincere, and serene life, repelling promptly ever thought of discontent, anxiety, discouragement, impurity and self-seeking, cultivating cheerfulness, magnanimity, charity, and the habit of holy silence, exercising economy in expenditure, carefulness in conversation, diligence in appointed service, fidelity to every trust, and a child-like trust in God.”