

Friday Night Theology, 18th December 2009
Change from the Inside

As the Christmas party season kicks in and the food and drink is supplied in abundance, I've heard a huge number of people telling me how they're planning to go on a diet in the New Year. It's that time of the year when we start to think beyond the Christmas season, and make plans and resolutions for the coming year. Losing weight, joining the gym and taking up a new hobby are usually the most common.

We all know this attempt to change ourselves rarely lasts long though. It doesn't usually make us feel good on the inside either: it rapidly leads to comparison with others, finding our worth in how many pounds we've lost and how many gym trips we've managed and then to feelings of failure when the good intentions are quickly abandoned. Such attempts at outward change are very similar to the attitude of the Pharisee in Luke 18, who prayed, "God, I thank you that I am not like the other men; extortioners, unjust, adulterers or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week, I give tithes of all that I get (v 11-12)." His sense of self worth was entirely found in his external behaviour and the belief that before God he was better than other people.

Now, of course, I'm not saying that fasting, tithing and leading a moral life are bad, far from it. But the issue for this Pharisee was that he trusted entirely in his own ability to make himself right before God, at least in terms of his external behaviour. The problem, like with new year's resolutions, is that we can only keep this up for so long - sooner or later we're bound to fail. Finding worth and identity in attempting to lead a perfect life will only lead to disappointment.

If that were the end of the story it would appear to leave us in a rather gloomy position, constantly striving for goals and eventually failing. Yet the good news that perhaps we can share with our friends and family this Christmas is that we don't need to strive to achieve perfection by ourselves. God knew we could never achieve it. And that's precisely why he sent Jesus, paying the price for our sins so that in him we could find acceptance, absolute love and approval before God. As Tim Keller explains in his sermon, [Inside Out Living](#), such approval and assurance means that everything we do flows from a place of security and acceptance, we start to serve because we want to - rather than as an attempt to live the perfect external life. And it no longer means we only focus on the outward behaviour - far more importantly, it begins to transform our character deep on the inside.

So perhaps as we approach the Christmas and New Year season and no doubt over indulge and make impossible resolutions, we need to reflect not just on the outward changes we desire, but to think about the lasting change that God can bring from the inside. In Luke 18, while the Pharisee exalted himself, the tax collector humbled himself, acknowledging his inability to live up to God's standard and asking for his mercy. And in Mary's prayer, the Magnificat, she said, "He has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things (Luke 1:52-53)." So the good news this Christmas is that as we humble ourselves before God, we too can find the mercy and strength that won't

just change us for a few weeks or months, but actually for eternity. Now, surely that is something to be hoped for.

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