

Never Enough
by David J. Lose
A Sermon for Every Sunday
Luke 18:9-14

Do you know the name Essena O'Neil? Anyone?

By the time Essena, a native of Australia, was eighteen, she had more than 200,000 followers on YouTube and a half million on Instagram. And then she quit. She vacated the social media space that had made her a star, explaining in a final Instagram post why.

I'll return to Essena in a moment. But first I want to delve into the parable Jesus tells in today's reading from Luke. "Two men went up to the Temple to pray," the parable begins, and then ends a few verses later by concluding, "And one went down to his home justified." In between is a story that most of us find pretty straightforward. One of the two men is pretty confident of himself. He is a Pharisee, one who has devoted his life to his faith and to his synagogue. His prayer, we know both immediately and intuitively, should *not* be our prayer: "Dear God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax-collector." It seems haughty, even arrogant, and more than a tad self-righteous.

Now, the tax collector he refers to is also in the Temple praying, but he stands at a distance from the Pharisee, away from the center where people normally gather. His prayer is quite different. "God, be merciful to me, a sinner." This is the one, Jesus says, who returned to his home justified. And there you have it, the moral of the story: don't be proud or arrogant like the Pharisee, but instead humble like the tax collector. Easy-peasy.

Except... except that the Pharisee is actually right. He is not like other people. He is not a thief or a trouble-maker or an adulterer. He is definitely not like the tax collector, someone who worked for the Romans, actually collecting taxes from his fellow Jews that helped pay for the Roman army's occupation of Israel. In fact, when the Pharisee goes on, we realize he's not just right, but actually righteous: "I fast twice a week," he says, "And I give a tenth of my income."

To be righteous, according to the Bible, is to live your life in accord with the law of Israel. The better you are at keeping the law, the more righteous you are. Now, we don't use the word "righteous" that much anymore, but we could easily translate it as "successful." If you are good at investment banking, you are righteous according to the standards of Wall Street. If you're popular at school, we might say you are socially righteous. And if you love college basketball, like I do, then each March you get to delight in watching a number of teams that are righteous on the court. In the Pharisee's case, he is successful at keeping the

law of Israel. So this Pharisee is both right – he is not like other people – and righteous – he has been very successful at living his faith. But he is not, Jesus says, justified.

The tax-collector, on the other hand, is pretty much the opposite. He is a failure at keeping the law. He has pretty much nothing to boast about. No one looks at him as a success and no one would call him righteous. Far from it, most of his neighbors – off of whom he makes his living – probably despise him. And he knows this, and so he stands at the edge of the Temple – or, if he were here today, sits at the very back of the church – and won't even lift his eyes toward heaven but simply asks for mercy. This is the one, Jesus says, who is justified.

Why? Because while righteousness is about what *we* accomplish, about *our* success, to be justified is to be called or counted righteous no matter what we have done simply because God says so. An example from everyday life may again help make this distinction clear: when my children disobeyed their parents, were unkind to each other, or got in trouble at school, they were neither successful nor righteous. And yet they were still beloved, still our children, still the most important people in the world to my wife and to me. They may not, in those moments, have been acting in lovable ways, yet we loved them anyway. And if we, who are far from perfect parents, can manage this, then how much more so God.

And so in this parable the Pharisee leads a blameless life and for this reason is righteous. The tax collector does not lead a blameless life but asks God for mercy, asks God to look at him and judge him not based on what he has done but instead to look at him and judge him based on who *God* is – compassionate, loving, and merciful.

And this is what makes this parable kind of tricky. Because when you read it in a straightforward way – don't be self-righteous like the Pharisee, but instead be humble like the tax collector – we might as well end up praying, "God, we thank you that we are not like other people: hypocrites, overly pious, self-righteous, or even like that Pharisee. We come to church each week, listen attentively to the sermon, have made our stewardship pledge, and we have learned that we should always be humble." Boom. We may be righteous, but we are not justified.

And that's the thing: righteousness, success, is never enough. Why? Because it's based on *our* abilities and accomplishments. And we will eventually fall short. Even more, it's based on comparisons. Notice: righteousness and success are always measured relative to how the people around us are doing. The Pharisee can't escape this, and neither can we.

Which brings me back to Essena. 200,000 followers on YouTube, and a half million followers on Instagram. She was, in every possible way, successful, even righteous, across multiple social media platforms. And yet as she described, it was not enough, precisely because it was based on comparisons. "Without realizing [it]," she wrote on a final Instagram post,

“I’ve spent the majority of my teenage life being addicted to social media, social approval, social status, and my physical appearance.” “Social media,” she continued, “especially how I use it, isn’t real. It’s contrived images and edited clips... [always] ranked against each other. It’s a system based on social approval, likes, validation in views, success in followers. It’s perfectly orchestrated self-absorbed judgment.”

Success, righteousness, Essena discovered, precisely because it’s based solely on what we can achieve and has its roots in comparing ourselves to others, is never enough.

Or if Essena O’Neil’s testimony isn’t enough, how about Aaron Rodgers. That, I should admit, is a bit of a hard example for a die-hard Vikings fan like me to use, but, honestly, the numbers he puts up year after year as quarterback of the Green Bay Packers are hard to ignore. So... a few years ago, Rodgers shared that a mere *two hours* after winning Super Bowl 45 – and being named the Most Valuable Player of that game – he felt strangely empty. Which is kind of stunning. As he said, he’d just accomplished everything he’d wanted to accomplish since he was a kid, and all he could think was, “Is this all there is to life?”

Success, righteousness is never enough because no matter what we accomplish, no matter how successful or righteous we are, there’s always more. Always more we could have done, always someone who’s done more or has more or will do more. And so there’s always a sense of doubt? How do we know? How do we know we’re good enough, rich enough, successful enough, pretty enough, popular enough, have good enough grades.... How do we know, in other words, whether we’re righteous enough?

Which means the secret to being a Christian – and maybe to being a person – is not to strive to be righteous or humble, not successful or a failure, not rich or poor, not any of the things we can put on a scale and measure and compare, but instead to simply receive God’s acceptance, love, and mercy. The secret of being a Christian – and maybe to being a person – is simply to recognize that you are always in need. No matter what you’ve done or not done, we all have needs, and the minute you recognize that you can ask God to meet them, giving up the hope of creating the perfect life yourself, giving up the penchant to compare ourselves to others, and instead just receive God’s love and acceptance, like a child receives of the love of her parents. Because when you do that – when you recognize your need – you discover God has already called you righteous, and holy, and beloved, and perfect. God, that is, has already justified you.

Two men went up to the temple to pray, and one went home justified because he recognized his need. Two and twenty may be singing in the choir today. How many will go home justified? Two hundred and two may have contributed to your stewardship campaign or volunteered to serve at church, how many will be justified. Twenty-two or two hundred

and two may be at worship at your congregation this morning, but how many of them will go home justified?

The answer, it turns out, is easy. All those who recognize their need. All those who look to God. All those, in the end, whom God loves and accepts and calls righteous and successful not because of *what* they've done, but because of *who* they are, God's beloved children, and because of who God is, loving, gracious, and merciful. Thanks be to God. Amen.

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