

**“I am Not Enough”:
Capitalism and Christianity on Human Inadequacy and Sin**

St. Mary’s Metchosin

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I am not enough. That is a thought comes to my mind several times a day, and surely yours as well. Feelings of pervasive inadequacy are not historically new; human beings have long had to shoulder unbearable demands placed on them and felt unequal to the task. But this sense of not-enoughness, of inadequacy, is an especially common curse today. In our time, no one has to come out and say “You are not enough!” because the message is just in the air. You cannot avoid breathing it in just as you cannot avoid breathing in smoke after the winds shift in the aftermath of a mainland forest fire.

Why is this message of inadequacy such a constant feature of our lives? When you live in a pick yourself up by your bootstraps world, if you are not succeeding, whose fault can it be but yours? Success or failure is entirely a matter of individual effort—according the hyperindividualistic common sense of our time. If you aren’t working to cultivate your own brand and marketing yourself, you are dropping the ball. If you aren’t living your best life, if you aren’t living the dream like your friends are doing on Facebook, it’s your own fault. If you are no longer contributing economically to the market, you are of little value. If you are a young family and cannot dream of purchasing a home, if you can barely afford your rent and your student loan payments, again, that’s no one’s fault but yours. It’s all on you. The myth of the self-made man is part of the ideological furniture of our times.

These toxic ideas damage our common lives beyond imagining. So then, why do they continue to play so central a role? Because they serve an important function. If you feel bad about yourself, if you feel inadequate, then a marketer can sell you something that promises to make you feel better! The reason you are feeling inadequate is because you don’t have the right stuff—the right gym membership, the latest iPhone, the latest efficiency App that will organize your days for maximum productivity. The more inadequate you feel, the more you are vulnerable to capitalist snake oil salesmen who can sell you the right miracle cure. You must feel like you lack something—a whole lot of things—if this entire consumer economy is to say afloat.

Moreover, if *you* are the problem, then the only thing that needs fixing is you! To make you and you alone responsible for the problems of our time keeps you from asking deeper questions about the political institutions and the economic structures that shape our lives. You don’t have to ask whether a world in which “The world’s 2,153 billionaires have more wealth than the 4.6 billion people who make up 60 percent of the planet’s population” is a world that makes sense. You don’t have to ask if it makes sense that, “The 22 richest men in the world have more wealth than all the women in Africa.” Never mind those troubling questions! *The problem is you!*

Does Christian faith have anything to say about the ways in which we are told that we really are inadequate? At this point, some of you may be thinking, “Preacher, you’ve got yourself a serious problem! Christian faith will not help. After all, doesn’t Christianity specialize in persuading us that we are not just inadequate but radically broken. What is more effective in making us all feel inadequate than preaching sin? Isn’t that what preachers like you have done for

ages? And don't the passages we just heard show us how terrible people feel when they are brought in the presence of God?

Isaiah and Peter have shaking encounters with divinity that leave them feeling unworthy. Isaiah recounts a powerful vision in which he finds himself standing before the lofty throne of God. His immediate response, “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”

Peter's encounter is, in comparison to Isaiah's, relatively tame, but nonetheless shaking for a fisherman—an abundance of fish caught after a night spent finding not a one. “And they came and filled both boats, so that they began to sink. But when Simon Peter saw it, he fell down at Jesus' knees, saying, ‘Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!’

There it is—the sin talk. Talk about inadequacy, John. If you think modern capitalism teaches us that we are all inadequate, don't you think that train got going with Christian sin-talk? It seems to me that Christianity concurs with contemporary capitalism. Both teach us that we are radically inadequate. Preacher, you just backed yourself into a corner! Where is the good news?!

Well now, it might indeed seem like I'm in a tight spot but let's see. First, Jewish and Christian scriptures are not saying that you, Rachel, you Wally, are to be singled out sinners. There is absolutely nothing wrong with you in particular! *You are not inadequate in comparison with anybody else.* In fact, we're all in the same predicament. What we confess, we confess about us all: “we confess that *we* have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done, and by what *we* have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.” The “we” in the creeds is important. Why? Because it affirms that all human beings are born into a world marked by brokenness, alienation, and wounding; no one is exempt. There is no way that the world's brokenness won't seep into us. If you are born into a racist planet ravaging form of capitalism, those forces will get into your skin. I mean that literally: the cells in your body contain trace elements of complex untested chemicals that didn't exist a century ago. Who knows what the consequences will be? That's what it means to talk about sin. If your father went off to fight in war and returned home a different person because of the trauma of that violence, that will leave its mark on you. Friends, we even have evidence that parental trauma can leave epigenetic traces in children's biology. Research with children of Holocaust survivors have shown that. Sin is not just about you. In fact, the propensity to make everything about you in particular is one form that sin takes.

So, let's get this straight. Christian faith, understood rightly, does not describe anyone as uniquely broken. Our culture, by contrast, does single out individuals and suggest that each of us are inadequate—particularly if we have not arrived, if we are not yet prosperous. Frankly, even then, you are still inadequate. I mean your little yacht is nothing compared to Bezos's superyacht with its 40-meter masts. If you become a billionaire, you still have to compete with all the other billionaires for your 10 minutes in space!

As for Isaiah's and Peter's experiences, let us ponder them closely. Imagine yourself into Isaiah's sandals. You find yourself in the presence of the Most High, in the presence of perfect holiness and love. It is most natural to feel the sharp contrast between the purity of divine love and our own fallible and stumbling efforts. “Woe is me for I am lost,” is surely a fitting and honest response!

But what is God's response? Does God harangue Isaiah and send him packing? Does God decide that Isaiah is right; there really should be someone else around better suited for the prophetic role? On the contrary. The angelic seraph meets Isaiah's needs, removes from him his own sense of impurity, and then God invites Isaiah into service! “Whom shall I send?” And

Isaiah bravely responds, “‘Here am I; send me!’ The God who calls Isaiah also prepares, equips, and fits him for his prophetic vocation. God is perfectly able to work through persons just like me and you, persons who don’t feel up to the task, persons who know themselves to be fallible and far from perfect. In fact, such self-knowledge might be an essential prerequisite.

Likewise, Peter, experiences extraordinary divine power in Jesus’s miraculous deed and presence. And Peter’s response mirrors Isaiah’s own: “ ‘Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!’ Again, Jesus’s response is identical to God’s own. Jesus reassures him that Peter is the right man for the job: “‘Do not be afraid; from now on you will be catching people.’

When we say to God, “I am not enough,” God responds, “You will do! I chose you and I will equip you for the work of mending the world. You are my child. You are not inadequate. From now on you will be catching people!

When we say to the world, “I am not enough,” the world finds a way to say, “You’re right! But if you buy this BMW, if you work out on a Peloton, if you lose some weight, if you become a social media influencer, if you rise to prominence and fame, you will be fine. But not till then! Until then, you really are dropping the ball. You must render yourself worthy in order you rank!

The Christian message affirms that you are in no way uniquely lacking. We are all wounded, we all bear scars, histories of injury and even trauma. No wonder then that we are likely to perpetuate those wounds in wounding behaviors. The Greek term for sin “*harmatia*” is drawn from archery. It means that we miss the mark! We are fallible. We make mistakes, and we even injure each other. That’s just true. Better to know that about ourselves lest we fall into delusions of innocence on the one side or into abject self-loathing on the other. Again, we are all in the same boat.

The world’s message of inadequacy is meant to put us into heated competition. The Christian doctrine of sin is meant to move us into compassionate collaboration. It teaches us that we are all equally citizens of the single republic of the fallen. In fact, a Christian account of sin would say that this attempt to make us feel inadequate is one of the characteristic forms that sin takes in our time.

Finally, even fallenness is not the last word about who we are. The final word is that we are nonetheless loved by a God who will equip and empower us to be God’s agents of love and healing in the world. If God can work with Isaiah and Peter, God can work just as well through you and me! You don’t have to be holy to enter into the presence of God. On the contrary, it is the presence of God that renders us holy.

God will find us where we are! You don’t have to be cleaned up and pretty first. You can be a man of unclean lips among a people of unclean lips. You can be sweaty and stinky mess after fishing all night with nothing to show for it, and God will still find you, right there. There, right there, in the midst of our brokenness, God’s grace will find us and lead us to wholeness. Amen