



# ST BART'S

A Sermon by  
The Reverend Peter Thompson, Vicar

## In Defense of Moral Imperfection

*Sermon preached at the eleven o'clock service, April 3, 2022*

*The Fifth Sunday in Lent*

*Based on Isaiah 43:16-21; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8*

*O God, before whose face we are not made righteous even by being right: free us from the need to justify ourselves by our own anxious striving, that we may be abandoned to faith in you alone; through Jesus Christ. Amen.<sup>1</sup>*

For those of us who have been conditioned to see Judas Iscariot as evil incarnate, it may be difficult to admit that Judas has a point. The perfume that Mary uses to anoint Jesus' feet is no trivial extravagance. In fact, it is quite expensive—worth three hundred denarii, or, as certain translations clarify, more than a year's wages.<sup>2</sup> Imagine what you would say if you witnessed a whole year's salary being poured on one person's feet. Would it seem to you like a reasonable expenditure? Or would you, too, gripe about such a reckless waste?

The average salary these days is a little over \$50,000 a year, and I can assure you that it would not be easy to spend that much money on a pound of perfume. I took a look at the Chanel website yesterday, and the most expensive perfume I could find there was worth only nine thousand dollars a pound.<sup>3</sup> I turned to Saks next, and the most expensive perfume I could find on their website was worth close to seventeen thousand dollars a pound.<sup>4</sup> Needless to say, I did not purchase either of these options. A seventeen thousand dollar bill for perfume is far more than my clergy salary can support. But a seventeen thousand dollar perfume—by the way, if you're interested, it's called Roja Haute Luxe—is not nearly as valuable as the perfume that Mary opened at Bethany.

It makes sense, then, that Judas criticizes Mary. Perhaps, even, Judas' criticism of Mary is justified. Of course, it makes many of us uncomfortable that Judas criticizes Mary—he is hardly a hero of the Gospels, after all—and Judas' criticism of Mary clearly made the early Church uncomfortable, too. Look at how quickly the author of the Gospel of John barges in to let us know that, whatever he said, Judas didn't really care about the poor. But Judas does make a valid point when he suggests that the money that could have resulted from a sale of the perfume would have made a significant difference in the lives of those who suffer from poverty. "More than a year's wages" is a lot of money that could be effectively directed towards basic needs like food and shelter. And, in Judas' defense, Jesus has spent much of his ministry up to this point lifting up the poor and otherwise marginalized. On more than one occasion, he has told his followers to sell their possessions and give away the proceeds. Judas is simply trying to follow Jesus' own instructions.

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<sup>1</sup> From Janet Morley, *All Desires Known*, 22.

<sup>2</sup> See, for example, the NIV.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.chanel.com/us/fragrance/p/120180/jersey-les-exclusifs-de-chanel-parfum/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.saksfifthavenue.com/product/roja-parfums-roja-haute-luxe%2F3.4-oz.-98308582.html>

As we know, however, Jesus rebukes him, caring more for the real woman lying in front of him than the abstract poor to whom Judas refers. Jesus in this instance is focused not on larger ethical questions about how we spend our resources but on being present in the moment and receiving gratefully the gift that Mary offers. Jesus is not interested in arriving at the most optimal solution through hard data and cold calculation. He is not concerned with the hypothetical good that could theoretically result from a different approach. Jesus appreciates the actual good that is already happening, that he feels on his own feet and beholds with his own eyes, in the here and now.

In her book *Strangers Drowning: Impossible Idealism, Drastic Choices, and The Overwhelming Urge to Help*, the *New Yorker* writer Larissa MacFarquhar outlines an ethical dilemma first articulated by the Australian ethicist Peter Singer. Suppose, the dilemma challenges us, that you are walking by a shallow pond, and in that pond a child is drowning. You can save the child from death, but in order to do so you must get your clothes dirty. For most of us, the outcome is a no-brainer. Of course, we would save the child. The condition of our clothes—particularly since they’re probably not the only clothes we own—is of little consequence when compared with the value of a human life.<sup>5</sup>

But what about the children whose lives are in jeopardy miles and even continents away? We’re not walking directly by them, but we can, through our financial resources, better—and even save—their lives. All we have to do is take the money we would otherwise spend on luxuries—things like theater tickets, vacations, meals out, coffee from Starbucks, and nice clothes—and donate it towards organizations working to save children worldwide. Singer believes that it is indefensible to spend money on even a single luxury while anyone, anywhere, suffers. “The formula is simple,” he explains, “whatever money you’re spending on luxuries, not necessities, should be given away.”<sup>6</sup> Jeff Bezos, Warren Buffet and Bill Gates may have donated billions and billions of dollars already, but they are still responsible for the suffering of others as long as they retain even a single dollar more than they need.

MacFarquhar’s book spends most of its time exploring the lives of those who take the arguments of Singer and his philosopher friends seriously. Though MacFarquhar genuinely admires these idealists for their dedication to ethical behavior and believes that they have made real contributions to the betterment of our world, she also finds that their efforts to do good make things complicated for themselves and for their loved ones.

Take, for example, a man named Charles Gray. Gray decided in middle age to commit himself “to neither owning nor consuming more than his equal share of world income or wealth,” devising something called the World Equity Budget that dictated exactly how much he could spend each year.<sup>7</sup> When Gray first envisioned the World Equity Budget, in the late 70s, that figure was \$1200, about \$4500 in today’s dollars. As he planned to take on this drastic limitation as a way of life, Gray made the case to his wife. Together they had already given away half of their wealth, much of it inherited from her family. But Gray’s wife was not willing to give away any more, so they divorced. In the following years, Gray donated almost everything he owned. His friends thought he was crazy. He scavenged through dumpsters in order to find food. He shared a small, run-down room with a new partner, and even suggested to that partner that it would be more ethical for them to live on the street.

Another idealist, given the pseudonym Aaron Plotkin by MacFarquhar, often left dirty pots and pans in his kitchen, telling his wife that his time was better spent working for animal rights than washing dishes. When his wife found out that he had inherited a small trust fund, she asked him to pay off her credit card

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<sup>5</sup> In addition to MacFarquhar’s book, I was also informed by Michael Schur’s treatment of Singer in *How to Be Perfect: The Correct Answer to Every Moral Question*, and particularly in the chapter “Oh, You Bought a New iPhone? That’s Cool. Did You Know That Millions of People Are Starving in South Asia?!”

<sup>6</sup> From a *Time Magazine* article quoted in Schur, 173.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.charlesgrayactivist.com/bio.html>

debt. The money that was being spent on interest payments, she thought, would be better spent on their shared life together. But Aaron told his wife that he was ethically obliged to donate the money to charity. “There were other people who needed that money more,” he says to MacFarquhar, “she was well fed and had a place to live, and there were people in the world who were starving.” Another idealist Dorothy Granada deeply upset her son when she risked her life fasting for nuclear disarmament after promising him that she would not put herself in danger. For decades after the fast, there was a rift between them, and he refused to believe anything she said.

Over and over again, these and other idealists compromised their own well-being and the well-being of those closest to them in the process of working for the greater good. Their radical altruism may have made them better overall citizens, depending on how one chooses to define moral worth; but it made their own lives far more difficult, and it profoundly strained their relationships with their spouses, their partners, their children, and their friends. In prioritizing the world as a whole, they offered up themselves and their loved ones as collateral damage.

In her essay “Moral Saints,” the philosopher Susan Wolf wonders how much of ourselves we should be willing to lose in the effort of achieving moral perfection. “Moral perfection,” she writes, “in the sense of moral saintliness, does not constitute a model of personal well-being toward which it would be particularly rational or good or desirable for a human being to strive...there comes a point in the listing of virtues that a moral saint is likely to have where one might naturally begin to wonder whether the moral saint isn’t, after all, too good—if not too good for his own good, at least too good for his own well-being. For the moral virtues...are apt to crowd out the nonmoral virtues, as well as many of the interests and personal characteristics that we generally think contribute to a healthy, well-rounded, richly developed character. In other words, if the moral saint is devoting all his time to feeding the hungry or healing the sick or raising money for Oxfam, then necessarily he is not reading Victorian novels, playing the oboe, or improving his backhand. Although no one of the interests or tastes in the category containing these latter activities could be claimed to be a necessary element in a life well lived, a life in which *none* of these possible aspects of character is developed may seem to be a life strangely barren.”<sup>8</sup>

Christianity, of course, traditionally states that Jesus is morally perfect, but I suspect that Jesus has more than a little sympathy for Wolf’s perspective. Jesus regularly spends time with people who are not morally perfect (we read about his meals with tax collectors and sinners last weekend), suggesting that Jesus does not seem to think that moral imperfection disqualifies anyone from the love and favor of God. And by supporting Mary in her use of highly costly perfume, Jesus reveals himself to be a defender of indulgence and luxury, of worship and wonder, of the kind of healthy, well-rounded, richly developed character that makes life worth living.

Jesus loves the poor—dare I say it, more than any of us do—and he wants us to work harder for a better and more just society, but he is not an absolutist. He knows that, in order to keep ourselves sane, we occasionally have to take a break and open a bottle of something expensive. He does not believe that we are required to sacrifice what is beautiful to pursue what is good. He understands that loving the world sometimes means showering lavish love on the person right in front of us. Demonstrating particular affection for those closest to us is not a violation of the Christian call to love; it is the fulfillment of it.

Before I end, I’d like to share one final word about this passage. I invite you to think back to the beginning of my sermon and remember that the figure who purports to be the advocate for ethical excellence in this story is Judas Iscariot. Judas’ argument makes a lot of sense; though we may disagree with him, his words are not ones we would expect to come from a moral degenerate. Perhaps, I’d like to suggest, this

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<sup>8</sup> Wolf’s work is quoted in both MacFarquhar’s book and Schur’s book, though I also read and draw from the original essay. *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol. 79, No. (Aug, 1982), 419-439. Accessed at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2026228>.

episode in John's Gospel should serve as a reminder of the importance of skepticism, even in the face of moral clarity. Evil people or people who would have us do evil things may at times seem reasonable. They may make sense. Didn't the devil quote scripture? Using charm and guile, nefarious actors may cunningly convince us to do the wrong thing or to do the right thing for the wrong reason. When evaluating and responding to moral critiques, then, we should be careful. No one person has the prerogative to establish themselves as the sole arbiter of human morality, and no action is wrong simply because one person says that it is so.

Amen.

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