

26. Jesus, Martha, and Mary □

Luke 10:38-42

Luke: A Walk Through the Life of Jesus

In his narrative on the life of Jesus, Luke now includes five small verses that tell a big story. In this short passage, we learn many things about the priorities of being a disciple. Luke continues his focus on the teaching and training of the disciples over the next nine chapters. In the following verses, Luke gives us a very intimate glimpse of people who were friends of Jesus. There is much we can learn from their interaction with Jesus and His response to them. □

At the Home of Martha and Mary

³⁸As Jesus and his disciples were on their way, he came to a village where a woman named Martha opened her home to him. ³⁹She had a sister called Mary, who sat at the Lord's feet listening to what he said. ⁴⁰But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, "Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!" ⁴¹"Martha, Martha," the Lord answered, "you are worried and upset about many things, ⁴²but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:38-42).

Luke doesn't tell us where this village is located, but we find the same people mentioned in John 12:1-3 as living in Bethany. As one leaves Jerusalem and heads east, one crosses the Kidron Valley and climbs the Mount of Olives. Bethany is a little village about two miles due east of Jerusalem along the road to Jericho just as it starts to descend to the lowest place on earth, the Dead Sea Valley. The Jericho road was a famous road for many pilgrims coming to the three annual feasts of the Lord in Jerusalem that each Hebrew man was expected to attend. If one lived to the north of Israel, most Israelites would go down to the Dead Sea Valley, avoiding Samaria, and walk along the plain following the Jordan River before ascending to the city of God, Jerusalem. That journey would take them past Bethany.

It is a beautiful thing that Jesus visited small villages as well as the towns and cities. There are many famous people of our day that would never want to visit such an unremarkable place, a small village with just a few people in it, but the King of Israel, the Creator of the Universe (John 1:3), allowed Himself to be so poor as to need the hospitality of His people. What a beautiful model of humility we see in this passage! Martha hears of His coming and offers Him to stay awhile (v. 38). No mention is made of her brother Lazarus in this passage, but John tells us that Martha had a sister, Mary, and a brother, Lazarus (John 11:21). Luke does not mention that Martha had a husband, so it is possible that he had died. The home belonged to Martha with her brother and sister living with her. If the house had belonged to their parents, it would likely be called the house of Lazarus.

This passage ties into Jesus' appearance in Jerusalem halfway through the Feast of Tabernacles, approximately six months before His crucifixion. All the men were expected to attend the three principal Feasts of the Lord, which would, perhaps, explain why there is no mention of Lazarus: "Not until halfway through the Feast did Jesus go up to the temple courts and begin to teach" (John 7:14). Lazarus may have already been at the feast. It would have been a thirsty climb from

the Jordan Valley to get to Bethany, Jerusalem being 2,300 feet above sea level; and Jericho 1,300 feet below sea level, so the incline of this journey would have been steep! Think of what it would have been like for Jesus and the disciples to make this twenty-mile uphill journey from Jericho, how refreshing for Christ to come across Martha's welcoming attitude and a lovely "cuppa tea" (I am thinking like a British person here, I know). Martha and Mary would have welcomed them with refreshments and water to wash their dirty feet. The ministry of Martha and Mary remind us of the importance of relationships. Jesus had special people to whom He was close to in this life, and the people at this house were among His personal friends.

Question 1) From this passage, what does it tell us about Mary and Martha's priorities? What do you think Mary was doing right? What do you think Martha was doing right?

Sitting at His Feet

The phrase *sitting at the feet* was not primarily a description of the location of where Mary was sitting in the room, but a technical term for being in training under the authority of a rabbi. Paul the Apostle, for instance, tells us that he was "brought up at the feet of Gamaliel" (Acts 22:3 KJV), by that he meant that he was trained by Gamaliel, one of the top teachers in Israel at the time. In this case, however, we see that both things were true. The Greek text tells us that she was literally sitting on the floor by his feet and giving her full attention to His teaching.

In the first century, it was unheard of for a woman to be a disciple of a rabbi. Women learning the Torah were frowned upon in those days. Some of you may remember the film "Yentl" with Barbara Streisand playing the part of Yentl, a young Jewish girl disguising herself as a man to study the Scriptures. What a difficult time she had! The rabbinic tradition included quotations, such as "May the words of the Torah be burned; they should not be handed over to a woman." Also, "The man who teaches his daughter the Torah teaches her extravagance."¹

We see none of that attitude toward women in our Lord Jesus. He was pleased to have Mary close, encouraging her to hear the Word of God. Jesus said that the words that came from His lips were not his own, but the Father's, "My teaching is not my own. It comes from the One who sent me" (John 7:16). In another place, Christ said, "I have not spoken on My own, but the Father who sent Me has commanded Me what to say and how to say it" (John 12:49). The beautiful words that came from His lips were the words the Father spoke through Him. No wonder Mary wanted to sit at His feet and not miss anything.

Mary comes across as a person passionate about the things that count. She knew she was expected to be helping Martha with the food and drinks, but how often does one have the God of the universe over for tea and crumpets (or whatever they had for tea that day)! She sees the eagerness on the face of Jesus as He began to answer questions and discuss the Scriptures. Wild horses could not drag her from the room! She made a conscious decision to ignore the unwritten rules, obligations, and expectations to help Martha in the kitchen. There are higher priorities than laying the table and pouring drinks. I am sure Mary had several questions stored up in her heart. She was waiting for the words of Jesus to feed her soul. □

¹ R. Kent Hughes, *Preaching the Word Series, Luke Volume One*, Published by Crossway Books, Wheaton, Ill. Page 396

Mary was right in putting the Word of God as her highest priority. We would all benefit from following her example here. All of our labor in this life should be subservient to the words of eternal life: **“What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit his soul?” (Matthew 16:26)**. Mary was so hungry for truth, and Jesus was eager to feed her the Bread of Life. The passion of any teacher of the Scriptures is the eagerness of the listeners to see the value and get excited about hearing and doing the Word of God.

Martha strikes me as a person whose self-esteem was bound up in what she does for Jesus more than who she is in Christ. She was a task-oriented person, and there is nothing wrong with that. We need task-oriented people. God has gifted some people in their inner DNA make up to be like that. It was her home, so she felt the responsibility was on her to treat the Master right. After all, if the Lord Jesus came to your house, wouldn't you try to prepare a nice spread of food in hospitality to the visiting Rabbi? Maybe Martha was a perfectionist and wanted it to be just right. It was a beautiful thing that she wanted to serve Jesus in such a practical way. In my opinion, Martha is sometimes seen in an unfavorable light in this story, but let us give honor where honor is due! Martha's servant heart was a beautiful thing and precious to the Lord.

The fact that she was working while Jesus was teaching in the other room is not the crux of the issue here. The problem was with Martha's attitude amid her serving, for she lost her focus. She began to be “distracted” (v. 40). The Greek word translated as "distracted" means to "be pulled away, or to be dragged away." I get the sense that Martha did want to listen, especially as she would come into the room from the kitchen with the drinks in hand for all the disciples. She would hear different pearls of truth that would interest her, but she was “dragged away” by her perfectionism and duties. The kettle boiling and the potatoes burning (or whatever she was preparing for them on that day) would distract her from the words of Jesus.

With at least fifteen people (Jesus, twelve disciples, Martha and Mary) for whom to prepare food, the kitchen was screaming at her. The trouble was that Mary had her back to Martha. Mary was sitting at His feet, looking up at Jesus, and hearing His words. How could Martha disturb the group by bursting through to get Mary to help her? Everyone would hear and see her confront Mary. She began to get frustrated, to steam, and to boil. The distraction was causing her to fret and to lay expectations on Mary, as she got angry.

Question 2) What kinds of things “keep you in the kitchen” instead of allowing you to be with Christ?

The enemy of our souls loves to cast seeds of resentment into our minds, taking occasion to create bad attitudes among brothers and sisters in the Lord. I wonder what kind of thoughts dropped into her mind? We must be aware in such times of pressure and stress that we put a guard over our lips: **“Set a guard over my mouth, LORD; keep watch over the door of my lips” (Psalm 141:3)**. Ask the Holy Spirit to make you self-aware in times when you are tempted to let an outburst of anger stream from your lips, whenever you feel within a “boiling over,” ask the Holy Spirit to help you to remain calm. A disciple of Jesus is to always rule over his spirit. **A man without self-control is like a city broken into and left without walls (Proverbs 25:28)**.

In the 1960s and '70s, several television programs looked ahead to someday when our advancements in science and technology would make life easier so that we didn't have to work so hard and life wouldn't be so busy. How far from the truth! Life is even more hectic and busy now than it has ever been. Have our technological inventions given us more time to talk to our neighbors or spend more time with our family? We live in a more isolated and busy world than ever before. We have garage door openers that enable us to drive into our garages without ever having to speak a word to those that live on our street. Our sense of community is undermined as we become busier and busier, working harder and harder to get more "stuff." If we don't make time for the things that count in life, then it will not happen. When we fail to plan time with God into our schedule, to worship and focus our mind, then we plan to fail at being fruitful. Mary chose what her priorities were. □

By the time Martha made her final outburst to Jesus, we can imagine she was getting as steamed up as her kitchen was! I can picture Martha banging the pots around, making plenty of noise to remind Mary of her duties in the kitchen. Ken Gire, the author of *Intimate Moments with the Savior*, writes the below words:

I can't believe Mary isn't in here helping, she thinks. Martha pushes a fist into the dough. She should be in here. Another fist into the dough. We could get this done in half the time. She pulls and mashes, pulls and mashes. You know, I'd like to hear what He has to say, too, but somebody's got to fix dinner. Martha reaches for some flour and flings it on the lump. They could at least come in here and talk. She works the flour into the expanding loaf. I can't believe He just lets her sit there. Another fist into the dough. Here I am in the kitchen, sweating, working my fingers to the bone... Doesn't he care?²

Martha's focus shifted from trying to get Mary's attention to blaming Jesus, "Why doesn't he say anything to her?" she thinks to herself as she bangs a few pots in the hope of drawing Mary's attention. There is no indication that Martha was directing her anger toward her sister. She can't get her attention; instead, Martha accuses Jesus of not caring: "She came to him and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!'" (v. 40). □

Question 3) Do you think Jesus knew Martha was getting upset by being in the kitchen on her own? If so, why do you think He left her to fret? Why did he not go into the kitchen and lovingly confront her?

Martha does not even call her sister by name. People who live together often have ways to signal one another when they're among friends, e.g., kicking under the table, pinching the skin, clearing the throat, and last but not least, "the glare." When a person glares at you, you are in trouble! I would imagine that Martha had tried all these things and was boiling mad that she was ignored. She did not realize that Jesus would rather have her listening than preparing food. We have such a tendency to be doing stuff for the Lord instead of enjoying His presence. John Wesley used to say, "I have so many things to do that I need to spend two hours in prayer to do them."³ To us, that is so illogical, but Wesley had learned that quietly resting and listening to God, has a way of

² Ken Gire, *Intimate Moments with the Savior*, (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Publishing House, 1989) p. 66.

³ Found at: <http://www.tentmaker.org/Quotes/prayerquotes.htm>

making life so much easier. Less haste brings more speed. More can be accomplished when we invite the Lord into the mix. He will often give us revelatory knowledge on the difficulty or problem at hand if we ask Him. □

Solomon wrote a word of wisdom on this: “If the ax is dull and its edge unsharpened, more strength is needed” (Ecclesiastes 10:10). It speaks of our spiritual life. When we allow our spiritual life to diminish due to lack of time with God, the result is a tendency to put more energy of the flesh, i.e., more physical strength is needed, into accomplishing the task. We get into the manipulation of people, i.e., pressuring them, applying guilt tactics, and raising our voices. The result of using more energy of the flesh brings about irritability of the soul. Our patience goes out the window with those we love. Martha became bossy, so bossy that she started ordering the Lord to do what she wanted. We say and do things that we don’t mean, and later, we have to apologize for our actions. I hope we do, anyway. I’m sure Martha apologized to Mary and Jesus when she cooled off. □

When people devote time in their schedule to rest and order their spiritual life around Christ and His Word, life has a way of being sweeter. It does not guarantee us freedom from problems or trials, but we can expect more patience, more peace, and we often will get ideas and insights that otherwise, we may have missed. Our perspective changes, and as a result, it can usually change the outcome of many events! It does make sense to guard our devotional time. Our God is the One who created worlds, and of course, He knows how we can order ours! Expect to receive what you need for your day. Expect to receive guidance and grace for whatever is before you!

Martha wanted Jesus to redirect Mary; however, Jesus wished to redirect Martha! Martha attempted to get Mary to serve Jesus in the same way that Martha did. Martha's irritability had grown to the point where she was commanding Jesus as to what He should do. We must give room to let people be different from ourselves. We are given different temperaments for a reason, i.e., to learn to live with one another’s temperaments. Thank God my wife is not like me! I have enough problems with me, let alone another like me!

Mary may have wondered why her sister was making all that noise in the kitchen instead of being out there with Jesus. We must learn to give abundant grace to one another. Some are always busy and active in life. They wake up at 6 a.m. and are full of life and making up their priority list for the day, and they cannot understand why their loved ones are still in bed. Others cannot understand why their spouses are so tired at 10:30 p.m. and want to go home to bed when they want to stay up. Their day is just getting started! We also have different gifts and temperaments for a reason. Each person has a different part to play. Give room for other people to be whom God has made them to be. This is not to say that we cannot encourage or at times admonish one another, but do so in love. Do not expect someone else to be you. When we are frustrated with another, we need to remember that they are in the same process of transformation as we are. Demonstrate patience and be thankful that God is also patient with you.

One Thing is Needed

It wasn’t that Martha was wrong and Mary right, but that we should imitate Mary in our worship and Martha in our work. To achieve a balance in both, we must put first things first. Mary’s

example of devotion should be our number one priority. King David wrote about his number one priority: “One thing I ask from the LORD, this only do I seek: that I may dwell in the house of the LORD all the days of my life, to gaze on the beauty of the LORD and to seek him in his temple” (Psalm 27:4). For many people, their self-esteem is wrapped up in their work. It has become a sort of status symbol in our relationships. We want people to notice how hard we work. We talk about the excessive hours we put in at the office as if we make ourselves out to be more important because we are so busy, but nobody on his death bed regrets that he did not spend more hours at the office!

Question 4) What things would you change as far as your priorities if you knew that you had little time left on earth? How would you re-order your life?

In case we missed the point in the story about the Good Samaritan, Luke again clarifies to us that salvation is not about the work that one does to earn a place in the kingdom of God, but it is about a relationship with Jesus based on hearing His Word and then doing what He tells us to do. It is not that the work is not essential, but what comes first? It is to what we give our first attention. It is all about what we treasure.

Martha was probably glancing at Jesus while she was busy to see if He was noticing her busyness. “Don’t you care?” she says (v. 40). Martha felt like she had to do everything and felt let down because Mary was not pulling her share of the load. She thought that this was unfair. Have you felt like that before? Some of us have heard these words from our parents: "Life is unfair! Get used to it!" Jesus does not respond this way, however. He gets straight to the heart with Martha. “Martha, Martha,” the Lord answered, “You are worried and upset about many things, but only one thing is needed. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her” (vs. 41-42) How tenderly He responded to her. These are not words of anger or disappointment leveled at Martha, and the doubling of her name reflects deep emotion on His part.

The original Greek sentence reads literally, “Martha, Martha, you are worried and bothered about so many, but one is lacking (or needed).” In translating the sentence into English, we have to slip words in to make the text understandable, so the translator has to choose what is meant by the original text. Could it be:

1. You are worried and bothered about so many *things*, but one *thing* is lacking.
2. You are worried and bothered about so many *foods*, but one *dish* is needed
3. You are worried and bothered about so many *persons*, but one *person* is needed.

Some would say that Jesus was only after one thing on Martha’s menu instead of an elaborate meal. Bread and water would have been quite sufficient. The one thing being referred to was some simple bread on a plate and Martha’s presence with Him. It is more logical to interpret the “one thing” to be Mary’s attitude of hungering after Christ’s presence. Time was short. Jesus was headed to the cross, and food was not on Jesus’ priority list, but Martha and Mary were! They were His priority! Jesus did not stop by Martha’s house for the food but primarily to spend time with them.

Luke's aim in adding this passage is to teach the disciples of Jesus by Mary's example. There is always much to do, but it should be held in balance to a relationship with the person of Christ Himself. Remember, at the last day, to those who are shut outside the kingdom trying to get in, He will say, ²²Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?' ²³Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!' (Matthew 7:22-23). These words are very sobering to us all, but we are called to be in relationship with Him, first and foremost—to know Him and to love Him. □

Question 5) What effect does it have in other areas of our lives when we put our relationship with Christ at the top of the list? Can you think of other scriptures that also point to this fact?

We find many scriptures that speak of this same principle, that of putting God first in what we do. Matthew 6:33 tells us:

"But seek first his Kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."

How much clearer can it be for us? When we put kingdom priorities at the top of the list, everything else is also given to us as we need. What do you treasure in this life? Whatever you genuinely treasure, you will put at the top of your list. There is another well-known verse, but it also gives us a similar promise:

Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him, and he will make your paths straight (Proverbs 3:5).

If we truly believe these things, we will have a desire to come boldly before the throne of Grace. We will not hold back! Again, we see this invitation given to us in the letter to the Hebrews:

And without faith, it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to God must believe that he exists, and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him (Hebrews 11:6).

The above passage is an excellent question to ask yourself: "Do I believe He rewards me when I seek him?" He will reward you when you earnestly seek Him! The reason this pleases God is that it demonstrates our faith in Him. That can be easy to forget or overlook. When we come to his Word, or when we approach Christ in prayer, when we worship, or when we choose to walk in his ways, all of these demonstrate our faith in God. It is a testimony to those on earth and to the heavenly witnesses that we are worshippers!

Martha became a great woman of God, learning to overcome her propensity to be doing instead of being. Martha gave one of the most significant confessions concerning the person of Jesus Christ and recorded in John 11:27. The setting for Martha's confession of faith was the death of her brother, Lazarus. Jesus had arrived and was seeking to comfort her and told her, "*I am the resurrection and the life and He who believes in me will never die*" (John 11:25). He asked Martha if she believed this. Martha replied, "*Yes, Lord, I believe that you are the Christ, the Son*

of God, who is come into the world." We also have more recorded about her sister, Mary. We meet Mary two more times in Scripture, and each time she is at the feet of Jesus. In one of the most moving pictures of sacrificial worship recorded in Scripture, we read of what Mary did, "Then, six days before the Passover, Jesus came to Bethany... There they made Him a supper, and Martha served, but Lazarus was one of those who sat at the table with Him. Then Mary took a pound of very costly oil of spikenard, anointed the feet of Jesus, and wiped His feet with her hair. And the house was filled with the fragrance of the oil" (John 12:1-3). The other time is again at His feet in John 11:32, where Mary was weeping at the feet of Jesus when He came to Bethany to raise Lazarus, her brother. Her weeping moved Christ to tears (v. 33-35). □

Prayer: Lord, I pray that You would help me in the area of ordering my priorities to reflect a life of devotion to You, such as I see in Mary. Also, help me to serve You and to serve others with the heart of dedication to service that I see in Martha. Please give me faith to trust You and to put You first in my life. Amen.

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