

TWO PORTRAITS OF FAITH

John 11:27-32

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“She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world’” (Jn. 11:27).

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus made an extraordinary claim about the Bible: “Truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished” (Mt. 5:18). This reminds us that every word in Holy Scripture – even every syllable – is placed there by God’s will and purpose. This should teach us to pay careful attention to every verse and, indeed, every word in Bible.

An example of this principle can be seen in John chapter 11, an account filled with mighty words and deeds. For that very reason we may overlook verses that seem incidental, such as these presenting Jesus’ interaction with the sisters Martha and Mary. But John is careful to insert them, perhaps to honor these women who were so loved by the Lord. But when we remember that the primary author of Scripture is the Holy Spirit, we should also realize that these verses are recorded for our spiritual benefit. In particular, Martha and Mary present to us two portraits of a living and saving faith.

MARTHA’S FAITH: “LORD, I BELIEVE”

Martha was first to encounter Jesus when he arrived at Bethany. She and her sister Mary had sent for Jesus when their brother became ill. But Jesus had not arrived in time to save Lazarus – so it seemed, at least – and a grieving Martha went out to meet him. Martha came seeking answers, saying, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (Jn 11:21). As she saw things, the problem was Jesus’ delay in coming, though her faith was strong

enough to hope that Jesus could still do something: “Even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you” (Jn. 11:22).

The Christian faith does in fact give answers to the great questions of life and death. Jesus did not rebuke Martha; instead he declared his resurrection power: “I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live” (Jn. 11:25). But having given this answer, Jesus pressed Martha to receive it: “Do you believe this?” he concluded.

Martha’s reply is a good example of saving faith: “She said to him, “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world” (Jn. 11:27). This is so important a statement of Christian faith – equal in value to Peter’s Great Confession in Matthew 16:16 – that we should carefully consider each element.

Perhaps most important are Martha’s opening words: “Yes, Lord; I believe.” This shows the attitude of faith. Martha does not quarrel with Jesus. She does not dissect his words with the scalpel of her preconceived ideas. Instead, she receives and believes Jesus’ teaching because she knows who Jesus is. Martha says “Yes” to Jesus because she knows him as “Lord”: she knows that he is the divine sovereign whose word is absolute.

This is where true faith begins, by turning our ears and opening our minds to the Word of God. James Boice comments that Martha “gives the basis of her understanding. The basis is the word of Christ... This does not mean that she understands everything he has been saying – in fact, she does not – but rather that she accepts it, whatever it is, because she knows that his words are trustworthy.”¹

The only way to come to faith, and the only way to grow in faith, is to listen humbly when the Bible speaks. Donald Grey Barnhouse writes: “What is the food that makes our faith strong? The written Word of God. What is the foundation of our hope? The written Word of God. What is the cause of our obedience, and the directive of our action? The written Word of God.”²

¹ James Montgomery Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 5 vols. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), 3:856.

² Donald Grey Barnhouse: *Exposition of Bible Doctrines Taking the Epistle to the Romans as a Point of Departure*, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, ?), 3:366.

Where the Bible speaks, faith says, “Yes, Lord.” Job learned this in the midst of his intense suffering. For his own purposes, and ultimately for Job’s blessing, God permitted Satan to visit Job with great trials. Not surprisingly, Job complained to God, questioning the fairness of a more or less righteous person like himself being treated this way. One of Job’s dialogue partners described him: “Job opens his mouth in empty talk” (Job 35:16). Finally God revealed himself, presenting Job with a display of his divine majesty. Confronted with true deity, Job understood his error in disputing with God. He said, “I lay my hand on my mouth” (Job. 40:4). This is the attitude of faith. Job stopped talking and started listening. This does not mean that Job stopped asking the Lord for answers, but rather that he ceased quarreling with God about the answers he received: “I will question you,” he said, “and you make it known to me” (Job 42:4).

Martha had seen the same divine majesty in Jesus, and when he answered her sincere question, she replied, “Yes, Lord; I believe.” It is with this attitude that faith begins.

Martha’s reply also reminds us that Christian faith includes content. There are truths that Christians must believe. John’s main purpose in writing this Gospel was to commend these truths to our faith: “These are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name” (Jn. 20:31). This is the very faith Martha confesses, and which we must also know and believe if we are to be Christians.

First, Martha believed that Jesus is “the Christ.” The Hebrew word for this is “Messiah,” from the word that means “to anoint.” Jesus is “the Anointed One.” In its fullest sense, this refers to the three divinely-appointed offices of the Old Testament: prophet, priest, and king. These anointed offices served to reveal God’s truth, offer sacrifices for sin, and establish God’s sovereign reign. To believe that Jesus is the Christ is therefore to believe that he is the true and final prophet, the true and final priest, and the true and final king over God’s people.

It is doubtful that Martha could have articulated all this at this point. But she lived in a time of heightened messianic expectation. The Jews were looking for a conqueror to oust the Roman occupiers and a political leader to restore peace and prosperity. Behind this hope was

the general belief that “one day God would send a specially anointed individual who would be the herald of salvation.”³ Martha believed that Jesus was this Messiah, just as we must believe, for Jesus alone is the one who brings God’s salvation to earth.

Secondly, Martha declared her faith in Jesus as “the Son of God.” This, too, could have a generic meaning, signifying someone as being especially godly in character. But Martha clearly meant far more than this. Did she understand that in Jesus’ virgin birth, the eternal, divine Son had taken up human flesh? Did she grasp that Jesus possesses all the attributes of deity, “the same in substance,” and “equal in power and glory” with God the Father?⁴ Probably she did not. But she must have been present on one of the many occasions when Jesus identified himself as the Son of God, and she believed in his unique deity in some vital sense.

Belief in Jesus as the Son of God is essential to Christianity; one simply is not a Christian without this confession. Many people are attracted to Jesus’ teaching, yet they deny his full deity. But to do so is to reject the heart of the Christian faith. Jesus’ teaching is not uniquely true unless he is the Son of God; indeed, in this case, his teaching is not true at all, since Jesus taught that he is God’s Son. The same can be said of Jesus’ mighty works, and especially of his death on the cross. The reason Jesus could perform miracles is that he is God’s Son. Most significantly, the reason why Jesus’ death has any importance to us is that as the Son of God, his blood is precious enough to make an atonement for the sins of all who believe.

There was a third element of Martha’s confession of faith. She believed that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, “who is coming into the world” (Jn. 11:27). This means that Jesus is the one promised in the Old Testament, who would bring the salvation of which it spoke. Jesus is the child promised to Adam and Eve to crush the serpent’s head (Gen. 3:15); the Passover lamb slain to redeem God’s people from sin (Ex. 12:13); the great prophet Moses foretold (Dt. 18:18); the Servant of Lord who was crushed for our iniquities and by whose

³ James M. Boice, *The Gospel of John*, 3:858.

⁴ Westminster Shorter Catechism, A. 6.

wounds we are healed (Isa. 53:5); and Jesus is the king of the line of David whose throne will last forever (2 Sam. 7:16).

Jesus asked Martha, “Do you believe this?” (Jn. 11:26), and now the question must be put to you. Do you believe that Jesus of Nazareth, revealed in the pages of Holy Scripture, is the Messiah – the Savior God has sent to a sinful, dying world? Do you believe that Jesus is God’s very Son, the Second Person of the eternal Trinity, “very God of very God,”⁵ manifested in the flesh? And do you look upon him as the promised deliverer God has sent not only to a fallen, sinful world, but to save you from God’s just wrath against your sins?

Notice, lastly, that the content of Martha’s faith was wholly centered on Jesus himself. Being a Christian means far more than embracing traditional values or admiring the Sermon on the Mount. It means coming to Jesus as Martha did, perhaps with questions of your own, looking to God’s Word to hear what he says, and replying, “Yes, Lord; I believe.” I believe in you, Jesus. I believe what the Bible says about you. And I rest my hope for eternal life on you. If you believe this, then Jesus promises you salvation. “Whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life,” Jesus said. “He does not come into judgment, but has passed from death to life” (Jn. 5:24).

MARY’S FAITH: “LORD, I COME”

Martha and Mary are quite similar, as one might expect of sisters. They were both deeply involved – physically, emotionally, and spiritually – in the recent death of their brother, Lazarus. They had together sent a summons to Jesus, and together they anguished in waiting for his arrival. Together they mourned the death and they even said the same thing to Jesus when he finally came to Bethany. But what makes them so interesting is the way they were so very different. They experienced their shared grief in different ways, and they expressed their shared faith differently, too.

While Jesus met with Martha, Mary remained in the house with the mourners. So Jesus sent Martha to summon Mary. John recounts:

⁵ Nicaean Creed, 325. a.d.

“When [Martha] had said this, she went and called her sister Mary, saying in private, ‘The Teacher is here and is calling for you.’ And when she heard it, she rose quickly and went to him” (Jn. 11:28-29).

Mary displays a portrait of faith that is different from Martha’s. Martha’s faith said, “Yes, Lord; I believe.” Mary speaks less, but if we could put words in her mouth, her faith would say, “Yes, Lord: I come.” John makes a point of how quickly Mary answered Jesus’ call: “She rose quickly and went to him.” Just as with Martha, Jesus had appealed to her faith. Jesus appealed to Martha’s faith by asking if she believed. But he appealed to Mary’s faith by waiting outside the town and calling her to come. Jesus always seeks to exercise and strengthen our faith, especially in times of trial and loss.

Just as Jesus taught Martha, he summons each of us to receive his Word. And just as Jesus summoned Mary to come, Jesus also calls each of us to himself. Matthew Henry comments: “When Christ our Master comes, he calls for us. He comes in his word and ordinances, calls us to them, calls us by them, calls us to himself.”⁶ Martha whispered Jesus’ summons to Mary in private, perhaps fearing the reaction of the visitors from Jerusalem; likewise, the Holy Spirit delivers Jesus’ call to us in the quiet of our hearts.

If we are to contrast Martha’s faith with Mary’s, we might say that Martha’s faith was of the head whereas Mary’s faith was of the heart. That can be an unhelpful distinction, since the head and the heart are never truly separate. But in all the Gospel accounts, Mary is presented as a more emotional figure and Martha as a thinker and doer. Martha came to Jesus seeking answers, but Mary came for love.

John’s description of Mary’s meeting with Jesus highlights three features of her faith. The first is her personal devotion to Jesus. Mary was grieving bitterly, following the established rites for mourning. The grieving in her house would not have been the “gentle, restrained, shedding of tears. It would be unrestrained wailing and shrieking almost hysterically,”⁷ in accordance with the Jewish custom. But when she learned of Jesus’ coming, Mary left all that and went straight to him. As George Hutchinson says, “Such as

⁶ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, 6 vols. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, n.d.), 5:849.

⁷ William Barclay, *The Gospel of John*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), 2:112.

have the opportunity of comfort from Christ will prefer him to all the comforts they can receive from friends.”⁸ Mary was such a person, and her faith expresses itself in her instant attraction to his presence.

Moreover, Mary was not influenced by the opinions of other people. It was neither popular nor safe to identify with Jesus, particularly among people from nearby Jerusalem, where the leaders were openly seeking to take Jesus’ life. Many people are kept from Jesus today for fear of what people will say. But Mary’s heart was devoted to Jesus, so when he called she immediately came. We must do the same.

Mary’s faith is further revealed by what she did when she came to Jesus: “Now when Mary came to where Jesus was and saw him, she fell at his feet” (Jn. 11:32). There are three major accounts of Mary in the New Testament, in Luke 10, here, and in John 12. In each passage, Mary is found at Jesus’ feet. This was her way of expressing her faith to Jesus, by worshiping him. And there can hardly be a better way! The Book of Revelation opens up a window into heaven, and what we see there is the worship of the exalted Lord Jesus Christ. “Worthy are you,” they sing, “for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God” (Rev. 5:9).

This raises a question for us. Why do we come to church? True faith in Jesus comes primarily to worship him, that is, to exalt his name, celebrate his saving work, and gather at his feet to hear his Word.

Lastly, Mary reveals a faith that relies completely on Jesus to meet her every need. In this case, Mary’s great need was for comfort, so she cried to Jesus, “Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died” (Jn. 11:32). These are the very same words Martha spoke; only a minor alteration is seen in the Greek original. But there is an obvious difference in purpose. Mary shows none of the quarreling that Martha may have shown. She comes reverently, humbly, and pours out her heart at Jesus’ feet. With the greatest spiritual intimacy, she is free to share her deepest feelings with her Lord.

This is the kind of faith to which we are all invited. Jesus responded to Mary with the most compassionate love. John writes, “When Jesus

⁸ George Hutchinson, *Exposition of the Gospel of John* (Lafayette, IN: Sovereign Grace Publishers, 2001), 230.

saw her weeping, and the Jews who had come with her also weeping, he was deeply moved in his spirit” (Jn. 11:33). If we know Jesus, love Jesus, and trust Jesus with the ardent faith of Mary, we will experience a compassion in him that will overwhelm our hearts.

A FULL AND BALANCED FAITH

A comparison like this between Martha’s and Mary’s faith invites some questions: which is right? which is better? The best answer is to realize that together these sisters portray a full and balanced faith. A mature and full faith is neither that of the head or of heart only, but that with mind and heart joined in faith in Christ.

Some of us are more like Mary. In this case, John’s narrative offers suggestions for how such a faith can grow. There are many Christians for whom faith is a far more emotional matter than one of knowledge. It is not that they do not believe the essential truths about Jesus. After all, Mary called Jesus, “Lord,” just as Martha did. And she would not have fallen at his feet and worshiped him if she did not believe what Martha perhaps better understood. But Mary’s faith is especially manifested in her feelings.

Mary displays some of the weaknesses of a faith that is driven by the emotions. She seems, for instance, to have been more captured by grief than her sister. The thought of “what might have been” seems to have overwhelmed her. She was overcome by the thought of Jesus’ absence when in fact he was close at hand. Therefore, while Martha, helped by her knowledge of Jesus, kept looking for his coming, Mary gave herself over to the grief that he had not yet come. The wails of the mourners, many of whom were likely professionals at sorrow, captured more of Mary’s attention and penetrated her heart more deeply.

If yours is a Mary kind of faith, then it is likely that you can grow by devoting more effort to knowing God’s Word, which the Bible greatly stresses (Rom. 12:2; 2 Pet. 3:18). Far too many Mary’s gravitate to more emotional settings – in this case, in the house of loud mourning, and today in worship that is driven largely by the passions – when their faith would grow more in places of reverent study. Growth in a Mary’s faith will often take the form of greater steadiness under

affliction and a better-informed understanding of Christ's saving work.

Martha's faith could also grow. She was helped in her grief by her stronger grasp of truth; the circumstances did not afflict her as they did her sister, and she was better-prepared for Jesus' coming. For her, Jesus is "the Teacher" (Jn. 11:28), and what she had learned from Jesus helped her greatly. But Martha should also learn to know Jesus as Mary did: as her loving Master and the Minister of her heart.

Like Martha, many biblically astute Christians busy themselves with God's work. As Mary is always seen at Jesus' feet, Martha is generally found serving (Lk. 10:40; Jn. 12:2). But service without a heart connection to Jesus leads to anxiety, frustration, and bitterness. The way to grow such a faith is to nurture a closer personal devotion to Jesus. When our service is rendered not merely out of convictions of the mind but also from a heart devoted to Christ, his presence sweetens every hardship and the mere privilege of serving the One we love brings joy to all our work.

What should a Martha do to grow his or her faith? The best answer is an increased attention to prayer. Prayer is the garden where love for Christ grows. Our knowledge of truth should bring us to come and kneel at Jesus' feet. Our desire to serve must be focused through our personal relationship with Jesus. If the Martha's among us will nurture this heart devotion, their faith will not merely say, "Yes, Lord; I believe," but will add a fervent love for Jesus, saying, "Yes, Lord; I come."

AN OFFER FOR YOU

Jesus came to Bethany to minister to the faith of his disciples, each according to his or her need. But Jesus had others in mind who were not yet his disciples. For by waiting on the road, Jesus not only called Mary to come to him, but he also arranged for the visiting mourners to follow: "they followed [Mary]," John writes, "supposing that she was going to the tomb to weep there" (Jn. 11:31). These mourners would be well repaid for their ministry of comfort to these sisters whom Jesus loved. They would be present to witness the greatest miracle Jesus ever performed prior to his own resurrection.

Something similar happens today when non-Christians come to church, perhaps to show kindness to their Christian neighbors, perhaps out of curiosity, or perhaps out of a need they can hardly express. But Jesus blesses their attendance, causing his gospel to be preached, the good news that is “the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes” (Rom. 1:16).

Perhaps you have come, not yet believing the way that Martha did. Jesus offers to teach you, and by his Holy Spirit he would reveal his divine majesty to your mind and heart. What can you do in order to receive Jesus and be saved? Jesus calls you to echo Martha’s confession of faith: “Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world” (Jn. 11:27).

And perhaps you have come, still lacking Mary’s worshiping love for Jesus. Jesus calls you all the same. Like Mary, your heart can rise up, answering, “Yes, Lord; I come.” If you do – if you believe and if you come to Jesus with mind and heart – it will be the beginning of something truly wonderful. Jesus said, “Whoever believes in the Son has eternal life” (Jn. 3:36). That eternal life will grow in you, and you will grow forever in the knowledge of the truth of God and the experience of God’s love through Jesus Christ.